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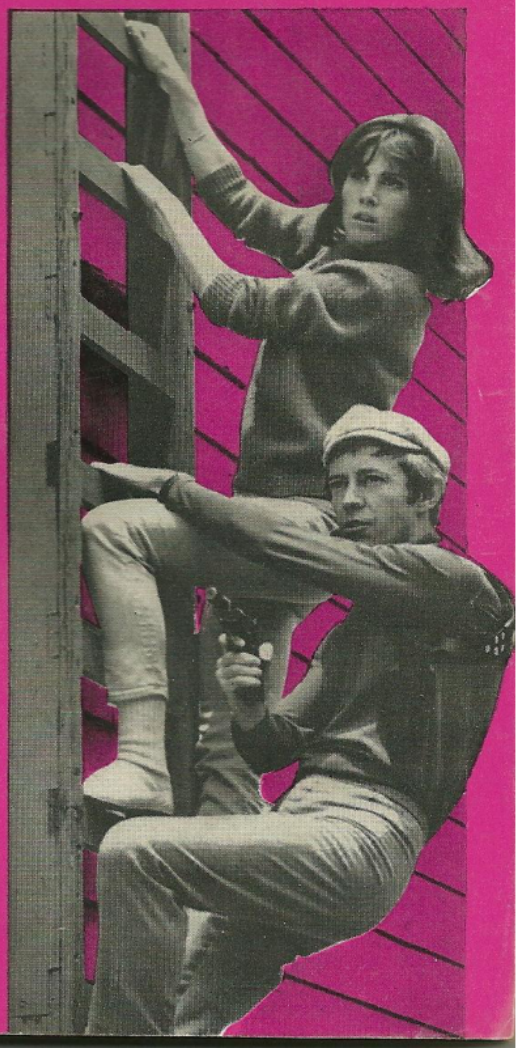

The Stolen Spaceman Affair

Number VI of *The Girl From UNCLE*

Robert Hart Davis

Tags:Grizli777

THE STOLEN SPACEMAN AFFAIR

By Robert Hart Davis

Somewhere, hidden, deadly, a haunted man held the fate of the world in his hands. And only April Dancer knew the answer to his secret–if she could live to reach him in time…

ONE

THE MAN FROM SPACE

A beam of light cut through the total darkness in the alley near the public dock in Kowloon, Hong Kong. It flashed a brilliant arc across the willowy body of the girl crouched against the brick wall. She jerked up her gun, aiming by instinct, knowing that her life depended on shooting accurately.

Her finger tightened on the trigger. Her shot and that of the man behind the light came so close together that the report blended into a single crash of sound.

Her bullet was just a split second faster. It smashed into the killer's forearm, knocking his hand up so that his own bullet just skimmed the girl's shoulder-length hair.

Completely unruffled by the hairbreadth escape from death, she coolly fired again. This time her shot smashed into the man's chest. The shock knocked him back against a garbage can. His cry of anguish was partly drowned by the clatter of the metal lid on the pavement.

"April?" a man's voice called anxiously from the opposite end of the alley.

April Dancer, top woman agent for the famed United Network Command for Law and Enforcement–called U.N.C.L.E. from its initials–whirled.

"Here, Mark!" she said. "I'm okay. I got him."

Mark Slate, her co-agent and partner, hurried down the alley to join her.

April picked up the fallen flash light and trained it on the dead man. Slate stooped to inspect the body. He looked up at April Dancer.

"He's a new one to me," he said.

"He has the coarse features of a coolie. The stain on his teeth shows that he is an opium addict as well."

"Then he was just a hired hand," .April said. "The other one?"

"I took care of him," Slate replied off-handedly.

"I didn't hear a shot," April said. "He had a knife. I had to turn it back on him," Mark Slate said quietly. "Too bad about both of them. I

would have liked very much to question one or the other."

"The gunshot will be reported," April said. "The Hong Kong police will be along very soon."

"I suppose so," Slate said, still staring at the dead man.

"What are you going to tell them?"

"Nothing," he said. "You are going to do the explaining. Inspector Malcolm will never believe me when I say I don't know why we were ambushed. He just might believe you."

"And he just might not!" April said. "He will think we are trying to put something over on him. He has been extremely cooperative to us on previous cases. I don't like to spoil that kind of rapport."

Slate straightened up after making a quick search of the dead man's pockets.

"I know," he said slowly. "But there is nothing we can tell him. I haven't the foggiest notion why we were attacked."

"It certainly wasn't robbery," April said.

"No," Slate agreed. "Just before they jumped us I heard one clearly say to the other that they must be sure we were dead. Murder was the motive, April."

"But why?" the girl from U.N.C.L.E. asked. "We are between cases now. We aren't threatening anyone that I know of. Unless THRUSH– do you think THRUSH is behind this, Mark?"

Slate shook his tousled blond head. "So far as I know we aren't in any of that vicious organization's business right now," he said gravely. "Why should they run the risk of killing us? THRUSH people do not like to take risks. They like to be sure."

"Something is very peculiar about this," April said darkly. Her hair swished about her shoulders in an impatient gesture as she tossed her head.

"I hear the police siren," she said. "Let's go down to the end of the alley and meet them."

When they came out on the street, a nearby lamp cast its soft glow over them. April Dancer was a surprisingly pretty girl, with a figure that would stand competition in any crowd of beauties. The same soft light that enhanced April's beauty softened the loud colors of Mark Slate's Carnaby Street ward robe, but did not hide the unkempt look of his blond hair.

April glanced at him. His casual manner almost annoyed her. She gave him an exasperated look.

"Somebody tried to kill us and you act as if you don't even care!" she snapped.

"Oh, I suppose I do care," he said lightly. "But I think I should have cared much more if the fellow had succeeded. I hardly think I would make a nice corpse!"

"When somebody shoots at me, I want to know why, and I want to know it fast," April said.

"So do I," he replied. "But after all, April, we have finished our assignment. We promised to make an appearance at Jeff Soames' party tonight. It is hardly cricket to stand up one's friends, you know."

"And what' about our murderers? They aren't the ones who are dead back there. Those poor devils are just the weapons. I want the person or persons who hired them."

"We'll hunt for them tomorrow, of course."

"Tomorrow? I happen to know that you have a date to take that pretty–but obviously empty-headed–Chinese airline stewardess to Aberdeen for dinner."

He gave her a startled look. "How did you know about that?" he asked.

"Never mind!" she said.

He sighed. "I'm glad you mentioned it. Completely slipped my mind. Okay, April, we'll hunt the killers' employer day after tomorrow."

"Or the day after the day-after-that!" she said. "How can anyone prefer a dull party to hunting for the man who hired those poor fools to murder us, is more than I can possibly understand. You–"

April Dancer stopped, a startled look coming across her face. She turned to Mark Slate. "Did you feel that?" she asked.

Slate nodded. He also felt the slight electrical shock from the fountain pen he carried in the pocket of his loud waistcoat.

"Something big must he up Mr. Waverly to contact us over the pen-communicator," he his face turning grave.

Both he and April removed identical fountain pens from their pockets. They twisted the caps and a tiny six inch antenna shot up from each one, revealing the pens as super midget voice controls, powerful enough to span the distance from Hong Kong to York City, placing them direct communication with U.N.C.L.E. headquarters.

April hastily spoke her identifying code into the speaker. Then she said, "This is April Dancer, go ahead, Mr. Waverly."

"This is an emergency!" Alexander Waverly's voice came in face-to-face clarity. "Are you in a position to talk?"

"The Hong Kong police are arriving," Slate said through his pen-communicator.

"What has happened?" Alexander Waverly's voice sounded calm, but the two U.N.C.L.E. agents knew him so well that they could catch the slight strain in their chief's voice.

"We were ambushed in Kowloon by two coolies bent on murder," Slate said.

"Robbery?" The U.N.C.L.E. chief asked.

"No, sir," Slate replied.

"I see," Mr. Waverly said.

"Then you see more than we do," April put in. "There is no reason that I can see for anyone to try something like that here. Is there something we don't know, sir?"

"I'm not sure, Miss Dancer," Waverly's voice held a slight note of indecision. "It is possible that someone in Hong Kong may have assumed you would be involved in a most curious matter. They at tempted to remove you before you started."

"And what is that, sir?" April asked eagerly. "Is THRUSH up to something again?"

The infamous criminal organization known only as THRUSH was April Dancer's favorite enemy. There was something about its mysterious evil that fired her imagination. Watching her face now, Mark Slate grimaced. He knew how she loved to fight THRUSH. No one knew what THRUSH really was or even what the word meant, but one thing was clear: the huge criminal organization was bent on world domination.

"Well, yes and no, "Waverly's voice said from the pen-communicator." THRUSH did not originate this trouble, but it is trying very hard to take advantage of it."

"And what is the trouble, sir?" Slate asked quickly. "The Hong Kong police are coming. We have only a short time to talk."

"I received an urgent request from the head of the United States Space Agency," Waverly said.

"Oh, I hope he wants to put us in orbit!" April cried, her lovely eyes afire.

"I sometimes think you have been in orbit ever since you joined U.N.C.L.E.," Waverly retorted. "No, the gentleman wants his astronaut back!"

"His what?" Slate asked. "Astronaut," Waverly replied gravely. "That, Mr. Slate, is the name given to scientific personnel who are placed in orbit by rockets fired beyond the atmosphere."

"I know, sir," Slate said. "But how do we get one back? Is he lost up there? We aren't astronauts ourselves. How–?"'

"Speak for yourself!" April interrupted. "I'll go up for him. Is he–"

"Just a moment!" Waverly said testily. "Who said anything about going up into orbit after him? He isn't in orbit. That is the trouble. He's been stolen!"

"Stolen!" April gasped in surprise.

"You mean somebody kidnaped him from Cape Kennedy?" Mark Slate asked.

"If I had meant kidnaped, I would have said so," Waverly said.

“Will you please listen?”

“Yes, sir,” April said, only partly chastened.

“This man and his space capsule were stolen right out of orbit!” Waverly said.

“How far up was he when this happened?” Slate asked, his eyes narrowing uneasily.

“About twenty-thousand miles,” Waverly said.

“Then there must be something to this flying saucer thing!” Mark Slate said. “Did men from Mars get him?”

“Mr. Slate!” Alexander Waverly snapped, “This is no time for levity. This matter is serious. So serious that world freedom as we know it may depend upon our success in this stolen spaceman and his orbital vehicle!”

“You say that THRUSH is involved?” Slate asked.

“To the extent that THRUSH wants this spaceman’s secrets for their own designs,” Mr. Waverly said. “It is imperative that we find this man first.”

“Yes, sir,” April Dancer crisply, glancing to the where a Hong Kong police wagon was pulling up at the curb, “Where do we start looking for this stolen property?”

“One of you will return to New York tonight for a top secret briefing,” Waverly said. “The other should stay in the crown colony to see if there is any possible link between the attack on you and this stolen spaceman affair.”

“Which one stays?” April quickly.

“I will leave that decision to you two,” Waverly said, “Now it may be that there is no connection between this murderous attack and the theft of the space capsule, but we must be sure. The astronaut is believed to be somewhere in Southeast Asia. If you were spotted as U.N.C.L.E. agents by men from THRUSH, then this attempt on your lives could be THRUSH’s way of removing competition. They would assume you were on the case because of your presence in Hong Kong.”

The police wagon pulled at the curb and muted its low siren. A lank Britisher with a clipped gray mustache got down from the side opposite the driver.

“I hear the police siren,” Waverly said from the pen communicator. “Who is it?”

“Inspector Andrew Malcolm,” April said.

“Excellent,” Waverly said. “Let me speak to him.”

Inspector Malcolm of the Hong Kong police came toward them. His nod was rather short. “Then you were on a case,” he said frostily. “You might have been truthful with me.”

“No, “April said quickly.“The attack was a complete surprise to us. Perhaps Mr. Waverly can explain to you.”

April handed the pen-communicator to the Hong Kong police man.

"Speak into it," she said. Malcolm took the communicator gingerly. "Yes?" he said in a clipped English accent.

"Alexander Waverly here," the U.N.C.L.E. chief said.

"Oh?" Malcolm said. "It has been a long time. London, I believe."

"Yes, the Ainsworth case. Inspector, I hope you will take my word that Miss Dancer and Mr. Slate are not up to anything out of order in your territory."

"There is more to it than that, Waverly," Malcolm said slowly. "Something very peculiar–perhaps even sinister. When the call came about his attack on Mr. Slate and Miss Dancer I was just returning from an investigation of a similar murder attempt at Aberdeen Bay over on Victoria. That one involved an attack on two people–a man and woman just as here and those two are a couple we suspect of being THRUSH agents!"

"I see," Waverly's voice said slowly. "And you think there is an interlink between the two?"

"It is my considered opinion, Waverly," Inspector Malcolm said, "that somebody is trying, if I may be permitted to use an Americanism, to muscle in on THRUSH's territory. If there is going to be a war between two great criminal organizations, then it is very important for me to know what is going on."

"I can appreciate that, Inspector," Waverly said quickly. "And I assure you that we will respect your jurisdiction. At the moment we know nothing about why our people and THRUSH were attacked. I will guarantee that you will be informed as soon as we know something."

"We try to cooperate with U.N.C.L.E. at all times," Malcolm said, "but you must appreciate that our position here on the edge of Red China is unique. The Communists are just looking for an excuse to seize this territory. We cannot afford to give them that excuse by getting involved in a struggle between two power groups."

"I understand," Waverly said. "You appreciate that I cannot talk freely over a transmission band like this. Either Miss Dancer or Mr. Slate will be returning here at once for a briefing. I will instruct him or her to give you a fun report very soon."

"Very well," Malcolm said. "I will release them just as soon as I get a full report on the murder attempt tonight."

After they broke the connection with New York, Malcolm questioned the two U.N.C.L.E. agents closely. Then he asked, "Which of you will be remaining in Hong Kong?"

April hastily pulled a coin from a small purse in her handbag. "You call it," she said to Slate.

"Oh, no you don't! I remember that two headed dime you gypped

me with in Rio! We'll flip my coin!"

"Did you ever see such a suspicious man?" April said to the Hong Kong police official. "Okay, Mark, we'll use your coin, but I get to call it."

"Go ahead," Slate said, pulling out a shilling piece.

"Heads," she said.

The coin spun in the air. It fell and bounced off the pavement. April shut her eyes. Slate bent down eagerly. Inspector Malcolm picked it up.

"Is it–?" April asked.

"Give my regards to Waverly, Mark!" Malcolm said.

April let her breath out with a deep sigh of relief. Slate said, "There must be something dishonest in the way you keep winning. It can't all be luck!"

"Of course it isn't luck," she said. "It is simply justice. I deserve– *Oh! Look out, Mark, Inspector–!"*

Mark Slate whirled at April's warning. He caught the briefest look at a figure across the street. The man was ducking back into an alley. Something was flying through the air at them. There was the crash of a gun behind him. April who had a moment's more warning than Slate and Inspector Malcolm had jerked a gun from her purse.

April Dancer's quick shot caught the flying package. It exploded in a burst of livid fire!

TWO

THE EXTRA HOLE

April Dancer's shot smashed into the bomb, knocking it back from its direct aim toward them, but it failed to prevent an explosion. The bomb went off with a terrific burst of fire.

April threw herself flat on the pavement. Mark Slate ducked, but Inspector Malcolm was too slow. He was knocked back over Slate, blood gushing from a jagged hole torn in his chest by shrapnel from the exploding bomb.

Slate half raised his head, seeing a target. He saw April suddenly dart forward. A stab of muzzle blast split the darkness at the entrance of the opposite alley.

The bomber's bullet slammed into the side of the police car, just grazing April. The slug ricocheted off, slamming into the concrete near Mark's head.

The flying splinters of gouged cement spoiled his aim. His own bullet went wild. April Dancer peered cautiously around the car wheel. The killer's bullet slammed into the tire near her head. She flinched slightly as the air exploded through the ragged puncture, but she did not draw back.

Suspecting what she was up to, Slate yelled for her to stop acting like an idiot. But she held her stance, presenting a target to draw the killer into shooting again.

It was a crazy gamble that the killer would miss her while presenting a target she could hit herself.

There was an anxious moment when nothing happened. Sure now that the bomber had fled down the alley, April pulled herself from under the car. She started to get up and was in too awkward a position to shoot when their assailant made his move.

"Look out, April!" Slate shouted. The crash of his gun put a solid period to his cry. April fell flat and jerked up her own gun, but held her fire when she saw a dark figure falling face forward out of the alley shadows.

Mark Slate ran across to the body. April came after him. The bomber lay on his face, arms out spread. A large bloody stain in the center of his back was plainly visible in the weak street light.

"Get back, April!" Slate's clipped English accent rasped out.

There was a tone in his voice that made April obey for once. They split, moving in close to the wall so they would not present a target

for anyone hidden in the dark alley.

"What is it, Mark?" April asked in a low voice.

"I thought I got him," her co-agent replied grimly. "But his wound is in the back. I know I shot at his face, for I caught a glimpse of it as he shot."

"Then he was shot by an accomplice!" April said.

"To keep his mouth shut, probably," Slate said.

"And I didn't see any light down the alley from the opposite end," the girl from U.N.C.L.E. said. "That means it is a blind alley!"

"You guessed it," Slate said. His tone was light, but it could not entirely cover the steel in his voice. "He's still in there!"

"Then he picked himself a coffin!" April snapped. "Inspector Malcolm was a grand guy. He has his revenge coming!"

"Now don't start getting blood thirsty," Slate cautioned. "We–"

"Don't worry!" she snapped. "I know we need him alive to–persuade him to tell his story under a shot of truth serum. And I let the law get my revenge for me! I only shoot when I'm shot at!"

"Sorry!" Slate said. "We'll keep him bottled up here. Another police car should be along any second. That explosion was loud enough to alert Scotland Yard in London!"

As if in answer to his remark, a police siren sounded in the distance. As it pulled up, Chinese heads started to peer out windows and around corners. A crowd began to gather behind the police car. Before, they had been too fearful to come out. Knowing the infinite curiosity of the Hong Kongese, April wondered uneasily if the people of the district knew something about the assassins. It was not like them to hold back until the police arrive. Yet it had happened twice tonight.

"Does it strike you peculiar we had the place to ourselves until the police arrived?" she asked Slate.

The Englishman nodded. "I suspect that the organization bold enough to challenge THRUSH is seated right in this area–and the people know it."

When the police wagon pulled up, April went over to report to the sergeant in charge. Mark Slate stayed to keep the alley entrance sealed. April quickly identified herself and reported that Inspector Malcolm was dead and that they had the killer trapped in the blind alley.

The police pulled the car around so that its light shown into the dark opening. The lights flashed off a brick wall at the back. There was no one hidden there. The alley was empty and clean. There was not even a garbage can large enough for a man to hide in.

"It's impossible for him to have slipped past us," April said. "There must be a secret door in the wall somewhere."

The sergeant of police looked at her. He had a strange expression on his face.

"I don't think it is possible, Miss Dancer," he said. "But we will inspect the wall."

He radioed for experts from the Harbor police. This hardy group had more than the ordinary experience in finding secret doors on fishing junks used for smuggling and in old pier warehouses used for the same purpose.

They found nothing.

"Where did he go?" Slate asked.

"I'm sure he didn't get past us unless THRUSH has invented a cloak of invisibility."

"Maybe these people from U.N.C.L.E. aren't as infallible as we hear," the sergeant said, somewhat maliciously.

"Maybe," Slate agreed evenly, but April glared at the young policeman.

"Maybe–" she began tartly.

"Maybe we had just better let it lie," Slate said hastily. "Of all the things we need a new revolutionary war between the Yankee and the Redcoat is not it."

"Oh, I'm sorry if I offended you, Miss Dancer," the young policeman said, endeavoring to look abashed. "There isn't time to beg your pardon properly here, but if you would have dinner with me after the–"

"No!" April said quietly, her irritation aimed more at herself for letting the trapped killer escape than at the brash young man's approach. "Keep in character," she added. "Remember you are supposed to be a Sherlock Holmes, not an Errol Flynn!"

"I think there's a little of each in all of us," he said smoothly. "Shall we say, in a couple of hours, Miss Dancer? It will take that long to tie up the loose end of this affair for the night. There will still be time for us to get dinner at Ching Low's."

To Mark Slate's genuine surprise, April's expression changed. She smiled brightly at the young man. "I'm sure only a very foolish woman would turn down an invitation from either Sherlock or Errol, and when they are both mixed up in one, she would be doubly foolish! In two hours, then."

The arrival of a higher police echelon, brought out by the death of Inspector Malcolm, caused the young man to resume his own work. Mark Slate gave April a searching look. She had a reputation of being married to her job with U.N.C.L.E. Neither he nor Illya Kuryakin or Napoleon Solo had ever broken down her reserve. It was totally out of character for her to make a date with anyone on such small acquaintance.

Even more strange was her going with a brash person like the sergeant. He was definitely not her type.

Slate eyed her suspiciously… "What are you up to?"

"All work and no play makes April a dull girl," she said evasively. "Why don't you and I–"

"Why don't you and I be honest with each other?"

"It's spring, you know. Or do you? There is romance in the air and the sergeant is quite a handsome young man."

"Shall I come along as a chaperon?"

"Did I chaperon you when you went out with that overstuffed blonde with nothing between her ears?"

"What she lacked between her ears she made up for in other places," he said. "I knew Maizie from a long time back. You never saw this man before a few minutes ago. You don't even know his name. Stop treating this as a joke. If what I suspect is true, he may be a very dangerous man."

"Danger, Mr. Slate, is my business!"

"And mine. But–"

She touched his arm gently. Her voice softened. "Don't worry, Mark. I know how to take care of myself."

"I know," he said. "But I'd feel better if I could be there, but I must take a plane out of here tonight in order to keep my appointment with Mr. Waverly."

"Don't worry," she said. "I'll be here when you get back."

"I hope so," he said gloomily, and wondered if it was really his suspicions of the young officer or just a dislike of April going with him that caused his deep uneasiness.

He walked over toward the new officer in charge. Chief Inspector Franklyn Toomey was grimly watching an ambulance crew place the body of Inspector Malcolm on a stretcher.

"Rum business," he grunted to Mark Slate.

Mark Slate said, "That sergeant over there. Rather young for such rank, isn't he? Most police sergeants are getting up in years."

"Oh, *him*," Toomey said without enthusiasm. "He's not with the police force. He's an army sergeant detailed to us for training in detecting smuggling activity."

"Oh!" Slate said, his eyes narrowing. "Is he stationed here in Hong Kong?"

"No, he came over from England. We didn't want to be bothered, but there was some political pull," Toomey said. "Does his work well, but is a trifle brash for my taste."

"And mine," Slate said.

"He seems to be making headway with Miss Dancer," Toomey said with a slight smile. "I wonder why–"

They were interrupted by a patrolman who brought in two Chinese who were in the neighborhood when the bomb went off. While Toomey questioned them closely, Mark Slate went over to April Dancer.

"I've got to get out to the airport if I'm going to make my plane," he said. "Want to come along?"

"Sorry," she said. "But I have a dinner date with Sergeant Ledford. Don't you remember?"

"April, you know as well as I do that this phony policeman was the one who killed the Chinese who tossed that bomb at us."

"I'm sure of it," April said lightly, "Shows he's a prudent young man. Subscribes to the 'dead men tell no tales' theory."

"A practical philosophy," Slate said, "but hardly one condoned in our present society. And since he is a murderer, he is hardly the sort of dinner companion I would select for you."

"You think I've forgotten how to take care of myself?"

"No!" Slate said. "But I have! So I don't want you bumped off, as the American expression has it, while I'm gone. I need you to look out for me when I get back."

"Stop worrying, Mark," April said, giving him a smile that had a considerable fondness in it. "I can take care of myself."

"I know you can," he said. "But the danger in this thing is moving into something we know absolutely nothing about. We can't protect ourselves until we know what we are protecting ourselves from. This we will not know until I get Mr. Waverly's briefing. So for goodness sake, don't stir up a hornet's nest trying to rush things."

"I'm just going to get some information!" April said. "He could have slipped out of the alley when the police wagon arrived. A person not in police uniform could not have gotten into the street without us seeing him."

"That's right. All he had to do was get a few steps away from the entrance and turn around. We'd think he was arriving."

"Come on," April Dancer said. "You must make your plane. I'll go to the airport with you."

Not knowing the taxi driver, they rode in silence to Kai Tak airport. When they got out, April said: "I Sergeant Ledford's voice on my pocket tape recorder. We can get a voice print from it."

"I think his background is clean," Slate said. "THRUSH would not have recruited a police spy unless he could stand a thorough check. The Hong Kong police are not fools."

"Maybe he isn't THRUSH," April Dancer said. "Could he be on the other side, the ones who stole the astronaut from space?"

"Maybe," Slate said slowly. "But take it easy until I get back. Don't stir up trouble until we get the background on this thing."

Slate sighed as they went into the airport terminal "I'm wasting my time," he said. "I–

"Just a minute," April said hastily, raising her voice as if she wanted to be overheard. "There is something important I must tell you."

She took from her purse a package of cigarettes which disguised an ultra-miniature tape recorder. She flipped the switch. Gibberish came out.

"Quiet," she said in a low voice. "I'm running the tape of Sergeant Ledford's voice backward. It's just a cover-up for our voices. There's a woman looking at a magazine in that newsstand rack behind us. She opened her purse and flipped on a recording device. Then I saw her adjust a remote receiver in her ear and pull those bleached blonde curls of hers back over it."

Mark Slate looked thoughtfully in the opposite direction and then after a moment's pause turned casually so that his eyes swept the girl April indicated.

He stared. He could afford to. The girl's back was toward them, but it was definitely the kind of a back any man could–and would–stare at without arousing any suspicion of spying on her. Inspecting her was something any male would do naturally.

"Pardon me while I give a wolf whistle!" Slate said.

April Dancer pressed the side of her purse to cut off the recorder. "Now do you understand?" she said, so their eavesdropper could hear.

"Fantastic!" Slate said. "In that case, I think we had best call the Hong Kong police and report this. Come on, there's a phone booth over this way."

They turned, walking toward the newsstand in the airport terminal. As they neared the listening girl, April said, "Just a minute, Mark. I want to pick up a magazine."

She turned beside the other girl, shifting her purse so that the end of the clip pressed against the eavesdropper's side.

"There's a gun built into this purse!" April said in a soft voice that had steel underneath its gentle tones.

The other girl stiffened slightly, but did not raise her eyes from the magazine.

"Just turn quietly and walk along with us," April said. "And remember–if you try to run, my friend will probably be too much of a gentleman to shoot you. But also remember that I am not a gentleman!"

It was obvious that the girl at the magazine stand was a professional. She did not panic or lose color. She turned quietly and walked away with April.

Slate followed along behind. His sharp eyes swept the terminal

lobby, seeking any accomplice who might try to help the girl.

It was a tense moment. If there was an attempt to rescue their eavesdropper, a shootout here in the crowded international air terminal would be extremely dangerous.

But despite the gravity, Mark Slate could not help comparing the two girls walking in front of him. From a strictly male point of view he found them measuring up pretty close to each other. The mod clothes set off physical charms that would brighten any observing male's eye. But to Slate's practiced eye there was a subtle something about April Dancer that transcended her physical charms and made her stand out above the other girl.

Suddenly a loud speaker cut in with: "Plane seventy-three for the Philippines, Honolulu and San Francisco now loading on Ramp Four. Passengers will please report to Gate Four …"

"That's your plane, Mark," April Dancer said.

"But I–-" he began.

"That's right," April said firmly, "'You cannot keep Mr. Waverly waiting."

"What are you going to do?" Slate asked uneasily. He could not shake the feeling that this time the girl from U.N.C.L.E. was headed for trouble.

"Whatever is necessary," April said.

The loud speaker sounded the last call for boarders on the U.S. bound plane. Slate sighed. Reluctantly he said good-by.

As the big jet winged its way toward the United States Slate was unable to shake the apprehension that gripped him. While waiting between planes in San Francisco, he tried to contact April in Hong Kong.

He could not reach her. The desk clerk at the Peninsula Hotel told him that the girl from U.N.C.L.E. had just left to have dinner at Aberdeen fishing bay.

Slate was unable to stifle his worry. It was a new sensation for him, he knew April Dancer was a trained and skilled agent–one of the best. When he arrived at Kennedy Airport he contacted U.N.C.L.E. headquarters immediately.

"Mr. Waverly, I'm here at the airport. I'll be at U.N.C.L.E. headquarters shortly," he said when the pen-communicator circuit was complete.

"But there's something most important, Mr. Slate, to take care of first," Alexander Waverly replied. "Call Hong Kong on Circuit Four immediately. Tell them precisely all that you know about April Dancer's movements just before you left her!"

"What is it, sir?" Slate asked, his heart starting to beat rapidly.

"Miss Dancer has disappeared!"

"What–?"

"This is probably one of the most serious matters that we have ever faced. Call Hong Kong! We must find April Dancer–not just for her sake and ours, but for the sake of every living soul on this earth! It is that terribly serious, Mr. Slate. Hurry!"

THREE

THE PURLOINING PUNCH

After Mark Slate broke the connection with U.N.C.L.E. headquarters he adjusted the pen point in the fountain pen which disguised the ultraminiaturized trans-world communications set. This shifted the channel from that employed to contact U.N.C.L.E. headquarters to that used for field contact with the crime-fighting organization's Hong Kong bureau.

He quickly filled in the Hong Kong chief with all he knew. "When I last saw April she had this girl a prisoner. I don't know the girl's name or affiliation."

"From your description she is a THRUSH agent," Stephens, the U.N.C.L.E. resident agent in Hong Kong, said. "She is no lead. She has disappeared too. She was the subject of a murder attempt a couple of hours before you and April almost got it in that Kowloon alley."

"I see," Slate said slowly. "Well, get a lead on an Army Criminal Investigation Department sergeant doing on-the-job training with the Hong Kong police. His name is–"

"I know," Stephens said wearily.

"His name is Ledford. There is pretty good evidence that he was really a spy planted in police headquarters. "

"He's the lad," Slate replied quickly. "He was trying to set up a dinner date with April. I tried to warn her–"

"Forget Ledford," Stephens said. "He's dead!"

"What's going on?" Slate asked, genuine alarm in his voice.

"A flash just came in that two men have been fished out of Hong Kong Bay. Both were murdered, and their fingerprints show both are suspected THRUSH agents. It looks like it's open season on THRUSH and U.N.C.L.E. people out here now."

Mark Slate whistled slowly. "Somebody has a whale of a lot of guts to take on the two of us!"

"It sounds like the surest way to suicide to me," Stephens said. "The stakes must be tremendous in this thing. Any idea what it is?"

"No idea," Slate replied. "Mr. Waverly says a lot of human lives are at stake. The whole mess seems to revolve around an astronaut and what he might have found out in space. I'm just guessing, but I'd say the danger is cosmic."

"I've got a sinking feeling about this whole mess," Stephens said. "I think we're up against our toughest case in a long time."

"Waverly thinks it's the toughest we've ever faced."

"He should know," Stephens said. "I need some help on this thing. Are you coming back?"

"I suppose so, as soon as Mr. Waverly clues me in," Mark Slate said. "In the meantime, I know you'll do all you can to find April. I'm really worried about her."

"I'll do everything I can," Stephens said. "Well, I'll be seeing you."

"Good luck," Slate said. "And stay alive yourse–"

The last word was smothered in a roaring blast that almost shattered Mark Slate's eardrum. The Hong Kong connection went suddenly dead.

Slate, his face grim, turned the pen's point to switch his channel back to U.N.C.L.E. headquarters.

"Mr. Waverly," he said. "Mark Slate here. I—"

"One moment, please, Mr. Slate," Alexander Waverly said.

Despite the anxiety of the moment the U.N.C.L.E. chief sounded calm. Only the slight deepening of his British accent betrayed the inner turmoil he hid so well.

A few seconds ticked off. Slate leaned back against the door of the telephone booth which he was using to disguise his use of the pen-communicator. Outside an irritated woman banged on the glass and asked if he was going to talk all night.

Then Alexander Waverly's voice came back on the air. "There has been an explosion in our Hong Kong office," the U.N.C.L.E. chief said. "I am unable to raise Mr. Stephens. I am trying to contact the Hong Kong police by regular telephone. I fear–"

"Yes, sir?" Slate asked when his chief hesitated.

"I fear that our adversary is removing all possible obstacles to his vicious plot, Mr. Slate."

"April?" Slate asked anxiously. "We can only hope and pray, Mr. Slate. I take comfort in one thing: Miss Dancer is a most resourceful young lady."

"I'm coming right over to headquarters, sir."

"Yes Mr. Slate," Waverly said. Slate took a taxi to Manhattan, dropping off in the lower Fifties. He paused for a moment, looking around for sign of any possible pursuit. Behind him, in the Forties, the United Nations Building blinked its lights against the night sky.

After assuring himself that he wasn't being shadowed, Mark went down the street toward the U. N. Building until he came to the Del Floria Tailor Shop, situated in the basement of a brownstone building.

The little gray-haired tailor who was guardian of this secret entrance to U.N.C.L.E. New York headquarters looked over his old fashioned glasses at the young agent.

There was a customer in the shop, so Slate did not walk directly

into the back as he usually did. He waited impatiently until the little man looked up mildly and said: “Oh, yes, Mr. Slate. Your coat has been altered. If you will step into the rear dressing room and try it on, sir, I will take care of any additional alterations.”

“Thank you,” Slate said.

He walked back to a dressing room. It was a cubby hole with a curtain. He carefully closed the curtain behind him. A twist of a clothes hook on the wall opened a secret door. He stepped through into complete darkness and the door snapped silently shut behind him.

For the briefest moment he was inspected by hidden TV cameras and then the door swung open on the other side. He stepped from the dark inspection room into a well decorated modern office. One of the nicer decorations in the room smiled at him from behind her receptionist’s desk.

“Good evening, Mr. Slate,” she said, handing him a small triangular identification badge.

Mark Slate pinned it on his lapel where it could be scanned by banks of intruder detectors set at strategic points along the U.N.C.L.E. corridors of the secret building. Anybody moving in the halls without the secret badge would set off a dozen alarms before he went ten feet.

Behind the receptionist’s desk were six small elevators. Each was marked with a number for one of the six subdivisions of U.N.C.L.E.

There were:

SECTION I: Policy and Operations
SECTION II: Operations and Enforcement
SECTION III: Enforcement and Intelligence
SECTION IV: Intelligence and Communications
SECTION V: Communications and Security
SECTION VI: Security and Personnel

As he took the elevator marked “I” Slate wondered, as he always did when he came to U.N.C.L.E. headquarters, what really went on behind this giant crime-hunting factory. As an international organization, it could cut across national borders and thus was the most effective group of its kind that had ever been devised.

He knew what U.N.C.L.E. accomplished, for he had a share with April Dancer, Illya Kuryakin and Napoleon Solo in many of U.N.C.L.E.‘s hardest cases, but what really made the organization tick was still as much of a secret to him as it was the day he reported for training.

As the elevator stopped, Slate stepped out into a corridor lined with closed doors. He walked past them to what appeared to be all oak panel door at the end of the hall. He knew, however, that it was

only thinly veneered in wood for appearance. Actually it was solid steel.

He pressed a recessed button. Suspicious TV eyes scanned him. He placed his hand against what appeared to be solid wood, but from behind a two-way mirror affair special TV scanners compared his fingerprints with a master admittance file.

Then only did the door slide silently back. Slate stepped inside to confront one of the five men in the world who knew all of U.N.C.L.E.'s secrets.

Alexander Waverly, Section I member and Operations Chief, looked up from the bank of recessed buttons arranged around the small TV screen on his desk. Behind him banks of computers stood ready to spew out information at the touch of one of those buttons.

He leaned back in a leather upholstered chair and nodded to Mark Slate. "Come in, Mr. Slate," he said. "Please sit down."

Waverly reached over and picked up a briar pipe from the desk. He thoughtfully rubbed its bowl as he listened to a coded report coming in. Slate could never recall seeing his chief actually smoking one of his pipes from his extensive collection, although Waverly almost invariably had one in his hand.

Slate's practiced eye noted the deep lines in Waverly's face. He suspected the U.N.C.L.E. director had not been to bed in the last twenty-four hours. It was hard to place Waverly's age, but Slate put him down somewhere between fifty and sixty. His hair was iron gray and his eyebrows heavily bushed. He looked more tired than Slate could ever remember seeing him before.

When he finished listening to the incoming report, Mr. Waverly opened a circuit by touching a color coded button. The chief communications operator's face appeared on the TV screen.

"Record all incoming calls to me for future scanning," he directed, "Do not disturb me for anything less than the end of the world. I do not wish to be interrupted until I finish with Mr. Slate."

"Yes, sir," the communications chief said.

Waverly broke the connection and turned to Slate.

"Tell me everything happened to you and April Dancer in Hong Kong," he said. "I want everything. Regardless of its triviality."

Mark Slate started to talk, knowing that every word he said was being captured by a tape recorder. Later his statements would be fed into a computer with all the other information relating to the case. From this mass of data the computer would deduce the probable answers.

Slate was impatient to learn something about the case himself, but he realized what Alexander Waverly was doing. Waverly was gathering all the information he knew before the top U.N.C.L.E. agent

could be influenced by anything he heard.

When he had finished, Waverly asked several pertinent questions, and then said: “Here is the situation, Mr. Slate. This astronaut who is missing was sent into space to set up a series of satellites which were designed to gather and concentrate cosmic rays. This would create the deadliest kind of a death ray “

“Who is building such a monstrous weapon?” Slate asked.

“It’s not a weapon,” Waverly said. “The United States CIA found evidence that the Chinese Communists are trying to devise such a weapon. In order to test possible defenses for such a death ray, the United States placed these death ray concentrators in space. Their main purpose was to permit military scientists to experiment with ways of counteracting their deadly beams at the earth.”

“I see,” Slate said slowly. “And if this astronaut was stolen out of space, it would mean that the secret of concentrated cosmic ray beamer is in enemy hands also.”

“No,” Waverly said, leaning back and rubbing the pipe bowl in his gnarled hand. “It does not mean that anyone has the secret. It does mean that two extremely vicious groups are using every foul means in an attempt to get it.”

“THRUSH–and who?”

“The stealers of the astronaut, that’s who,” Waverly said, the lines of his face seemed to deepen as he spoke.

“And the stealers are–?” Slate asked.

“You tell me,” Waverly said. “I don’t know.”

“No leads at all, sir?” Mark Slate asked, slumping down in his chair.

Alexander Waverly stared at the loud waistcoat worn by his agent. Then he said, “One lead, but it is not producing any fast results. Let me give you the full story.

“First, this astronaut was stolen out of space because he knew the secret of the death ray. As I got the story from the space agency, these revolving satellites work like the electrical condensers in an auto mobile distributor. They gather up weak charges until they reach a certain concentration and then discharge them in an intensified burst of energy.”

“In effect,” Slate said, “the satellites amplify the deadly cosmic rays. Is that it?”

“Not exactly, but the effect is the same. Cosmic rays from space are absorbed by the earth’s atmosphere, which is the only thing that keeps life alive. The condenser satellites store up these weak rays until they reach a point where their strength can, penetrate the earth’s protective atmosphere. It is really a pulse rather than a ray.”

“I see, sir,” Slate said. “I can see how an unfriendly nation would

want to learn this deadly secret. But how did they steal the space man out of orbit? Our present day launch and rendezvous techniques aren't advanced sufficiently to do anything like that."

"It was amazingly simple," Waverly said. "There was nothing Buck Rogerish about it. These people bribed or planted a spy in the astronaut control center. This spy was a punch card operator. She takes the control data figured out by scientists and punches it on to control cards which the computers transmit to the astronaut's little black boxes in space."

"I am familiar with the system," Slate said. "The astronaut has little to do with flying his spacecraft. His problems are worked out by computers on the ground."

"Yes," the U.N.C.L.E. operations chief said, "and one of the most vital functions of this telemetered data is to tell the astronaut the exact moment to fire his retro-rockets to reenter the earth's atmosphere."

"I get it," Slate said. "This fake punch card caused the astronaut to come down prematurely, so that he landed where his kidnapers wanted instead of the regular splash down area."

"That is correct," Waverly said.

He leaned forward to touch a colored button on the desk control panel. A section of the wall rolled back to expose a huge lighted map of the world.

Mark Slate stretched out his legs and turned so he could get a better view of the map. Three tiny lights glowed redly to mark critical points in the case. One was centered at a Florida missile launch base. Another glowed in Southeast Asia. The third burned in Hong Kong.

Looking at the third light, Slate moved his legs uneasily. Since his arrival Mr. Waverly had made no mention of April Dancer. Slate had heard nothing about her since that first flash that she was missing. He was in an agony of suspense to know what had happened to her. Twice before he asked Waverly about April and had gotten no answer.

Now he leaned forward expectantly, hoping that the Hong Kong warning light would cause his chief to bring up the subject of April's disappearance.

Waverly disappointed him. The U.N.C.L.E. chief walked over to the map and touched the tiny light glowing in Southeast Asia to the east of Hong Kong.

"This," he said, "is Khmerrania. You are familiar with it?"

"Yes, sir," Slate said, "It's a feudal kingdom that mixes the cultures of its neighbors, Thailand and Cambodia."

"That is where the astronaut's capsule landed," Waverly said, turning away from the map. "Khmerrania is an extremely back ward country. It does not have the technological development to exploit this

death ray from space."

"I understand sir," Slate said. "The astronaut was pulled down in this country because his kidnapers could make a deal with the Khmerranian government," Waverly said. "You know, don't you, that even though we tracked the descent of this capsule and know definitely that it landed in Khmerrania, we cannot enter that country to rescue him without that government's permission? The United States cannot send men across an international border without declaring war if the other country objects. The Khmerranians object."

"So what do we do?" Slate asked.

"We get him out," Waverly said positively. "Since the United States cannot do it officially, U.N.C.L.E. has been asked to recover this man. You see, although there was a space weapon involved, this is not known to the world. To acknowledge it might precipitate an arms race in space which the U.S. wishes to avoid. So the government in Washington must keep up the fiction that this was a peaceful scientific exploration."

"How can Khmerrania refuse to let an American search party come in and look for him?" Mark Slate asked.

"Shortly before this, and I think in preparation for it, the government there broke diplomatic relations with us. The British government asked them to permit an American scientific team to cross the border. The Khmerranians refused. They said they would locate the fallen astronaut and return him to the U.S."

"And you think they will?" "

We don't know. I hope they can find him before THRUSH does. That evil organization is aware of this also and intends to beat us and the Khmerranians to the secret. If they get him first, he cannot hold his secret. Not with the kind of truth drugs manufactured today."

"Do we know the exact spot he landed?" Slate asked.

"Yes," Alexander Waverly said. "There was a Khmerranian patrol waiting for him, but he gave them the slip. He is lost somewhere in the jungles along the Mekong River. We must find him."

"I understand, sir," Slate said. "Shall I leave immediately?"

"There is additional super-secret information which you must be briefed on. And then there is the matter of Miss Dancer's whereabouts."

"Yes," Slate said eagerly. "Is there any word from her?"

"Not yet," Waverly said. "The hotel reported that she arranged to have a fishing junk leased for a sail to Macao. The boat was to be ready at eleven o'clock tonight our time here in New York. If she does not report in by then, we will have genuine cause to worry. I have great faith in Miss Dancer. I am sure that something irregular has happened, but I think she will come out of it. I am certain of it."

“I wish I knew what happened when I left her with that THRUSH girl,” Mark Slate said uneasily.

“She returned to her hotel after that,” Waverly said. “We–”

A brilliant light flashed on the desk console. The U.N.C.L.E. chief strode quickly back to his leather chair. He punched the connect circuit and said, “Waverly here.”

“Mr. Waverly!” an excited voice said. “This is Randy Kovacs!”

“Yes, Randy, go ahead,” ‘Waverly said.

Mark Slate leaned forward expectantly. Randy Kovacs was U.N.C.L.E.‘S teenage on-the-job trainee, the first in the organization’s history. On several occasions, the boy had proven himself surprisingly capable for a beginner.

“She’s dead, Mr. Waverly!” Kovacs said excitedly.

“What!” the U.N.C.L.E. chief cried.

For a brief moment Alexander Waverly was jolted out of his usual calm. Slate leaped to his own feet.

“Yes, sir!” Kovacs repeated. “The report just came in! She’s dead!”

FOUR

THE MEN FROM PROJECT X

When April Dancer walked away from Mark Slate in the Hong Kong air terminal, she ordered her captive to go straight to the taxi which she asked to wait for her.

The driver looked up dully when they approached. He was a perfect picture of complete stupidity. But behind the yellow mask of his face he was one of the most valuable men attached to the Hong Kong bureau of U.N.C.L.E.

"Get in!" April ordered the other girl.

"You won't get away with this!" captive said in a low voice.

"Come, let's not argue the point," April said tersely. "Just do what I tell you!"

The other girl tossed her head, making her shoulder-length bob swirl angrily. She raised her purse as if to strike April with it. The girl from U.N.C.L.E. raised her own handbag so that the concealed gun built into the clasp pointed directly at the angry blonde.

"As you probably know," April said in a hard, steady voice, "these guns can fire bullets or knockout pellets. If you–" She looked up suddenly.

"Don't make a move!" a harsh voice said from outside the car.

April Dancer stiffened. A contemptuous smile crossed the lips of the blonde captive. The girl from U.N.C.L.E. bit her lower lip in vexation. She realized then that the brief argument started by the girl was just to divert her attention. Now the girl's male companion stepped up close to the taxi.

He held a lighter in his hand and an unlighted cigarette dangled from his lips. But the way he handled the lighter told April that it concealed a deadly pellet gun. April had had experience with such a gun on her last case. The pellets, thin as needles, penetrated deep into the flesh and then exploded with a savage burst that ripped a savage hole in the unfortunate victim.

The moment she saw this one in the grim-faced man's hand, she knew for sure that she was in the presence of THRUSH. The gun was the giveaway.

"Move away!" April snapped. "I have your confederate covered. If you try to shoot me, I'll kill her first! "

The man chuckled. The cigarette waggled in a falsely friendly manner from his lips. "She's expendable!" he said in a mumbling

voice.

The THRUSH girl's eyes narrowed slightly. It was the only sign she gave of resentment at her companion's callous dismissal of her life. The smile stayed fixed on her lips.

However, that slight betrayal of her true feeling gave April a slight hope that she could use the THRUSH girl's sudden anger to a good advantage.

"Take her bag," the THRUSH man commanded the blonde. "These U.N.C.L.E. agents carry a storehouse of cute booby traps in it. Take them away and she's helpless."

Suddenly April's eyes widened. The fear she was starting to show now broke into a look of relief. She was looking beyond the THRUSH man.

Startled by the relief on her face, he whirled to see what brought on her change of feeling. In the brief second he jerked his eyes around to discover that she had seen no one at all, the U.N.C.L.E. operative disguised as a cab driver, touched a hidden button on his steering wheel.

Instantly the door glass shot up. The THRUSH man jerked his head back and pulled the trigger of the gun concealed in the lighter.

The needle pellet smashed against the bullet-proof glass in the U.N.C.L.E. cab. It rebounded, burying itself in the man's arm. The explosion shattered the bone and ripped out a huge gouge of flesh. The dying man fell, his face turning green as poison from the pellet raced through his body.

April did not have time to feel fear from her narrow escape. She held her own gun steadily on the THRUSH girl.

"What do we do?" the Chinese driver asked in a heavily British accent that contrasted oddly with his oriental features.

"No one seems to have seen us," April said hastily; "I don't want to get detained for a police inquiry. You stay and make a report. This woman and I will take another cab."

She motioned for the girl to get out. The blonde opened the door and slid out on the other side. She kept her blue eyes thoughtfully on the gun purse in April's hand.

Together the two girls walked across the parking lot. Shortly after, April signaled another cab.

They drove back to the heart of Kowloon. The THRUSH agent looked surprised when April moved the purse gun to a position where it no longer pointed at her captive.

"That man really meant it when he said that you were expendable," April said.

The other girl's lips tightened. She hesitated and then said, "You're wasting your time if you think you can make a deal with me."

”I’m not asking you to betray THRUSH,” April Dancer said. “I’ve been around. I know what happens to agents who give away THRUSH secrets. But–”

“But, what?” the other girl asked suspiciously.

“I also know what happens to THRUSH agents who fail on important jobs,” April said.

The other woman swallowed hard.

“And you’ve failed twice,” April went on. “Once with me, which led to the death of what I suspect is an important THRUSH man. And again when those spaceman-stealers attacked you. You were the agent I believe that they tried to kill, weren’t you?”

When the THRUSH girl did not reply, April Dancer added, “All I have to do is take you to police headquarters and make a check. You see now the difference between our organizations. I can get police assistance. You cannot.”

The girl took a deep breath. “Yes,” she said in a low voice. “I was the one the men from Project X tried to kill. They were the same ones who tried to kill you and the U.N.C.L.E. agent a short time later.”

“Now,” April said briskly, “we are getting somewhere. U.N.C.L.E. does not shoot its agents when they fail as THRUSH does. But we get let out. I like this job. I can’t afford to fall down on this–”

April hesitated and decided to bluff by using the name the girl from THRUSH dropped. “On this Project X thing,” she added, “perhaps we could help each other to our mutual advantage.”

The girl from THRUSH bit her lower lip nervously. She took a deep breath and said, “I can’t trust you.”

“I certainly am not fool enough to trust you,” April said decisively. “We don’t have to trust each other. We can exchange information that will help either or both of us to break Project X. Then may the best girl win!”

“What do you know about Project X?” the girl asked.

“Probably not any more than you do,” April countered. “However, my partner, Mark Slate, is in New York being briefed on the very latest developments.”

“At least your people tell you enough to do your job,” the blonde said bitterly. “I know too little.”

“Two of your people were killed last night,” April said. “Are you going to take a chance now and be the third?”

“Where can we talk?” the girl said.

“Can you afford to come to my hotel room?” April asked.

“I think so. After all, they know I’m your prisoner.”

“They are watching us?”

“Probably.”

April Dancer nodded. She did not believe it. But she did not care to

contradict her prisoner.

"Okay," April said. "Come along with me."

The two girls walked across the lobby, presenting a picture that turned every male eye in the place. They took the elevator to the third floor and walked down the hall to April's room. The hall boy, at his desk by the elevator, spoke to them as they went by.

At April's door, the girl from U.N.C.L.E. took the key from her purse, but did not put it in the lock "Did that hall boy seem frightened to you?" she asked THRUSH girl in a low voice.

"I can't tell anything about these Orientals," the blonde said nervously. "You think there's an ambush–?"

"Possibly," April said. "Maybe I'm being overly jumpy, but I'm alive today because I'm cautious."

She turned and motioned to the hall boy. His face remained passive, but his Adam's apple jerked as he swallowed. He got up reluctantly. When he joined them, April said in a low voice: "Open the door for me."

She held out the key to him. He took a quick step backward. Fright showing on his moon-face.

April Dancer snapped open her bag, pulling out a tiny automatic. The hall boy paled and started to tremble.

"Missy–" he began.

"Is there an empty room on this floor?" April cut in.

He nodded. His eyes watered. He seemed on the verge of bursting into tears. An hysterical servant was the last annoyance April wanted at that moment.

"Take us there," she commanded.

He swallowed again. His head dropped.

"Take us there!" April snapped,

"Yes, Missy'" he said in a strangled voice.

He shuffled down three doors and shoved a house key in the lock. He stood back for the girls to enter.

"You first," April said coldly.

He shuffled into the room. The two girls followed. April held the tiny automatic in one hand and had the pellet gun in her purse clasp ready where she could fire it with the other.

The room, the sitting room for a suite, was empty.

April reached in her handbag, taking out a tiny flesh-colored ear plug which was in reality an ingenious product of the U.N.C.L.E. laboratories. It gave a curious hum if any electronic listening devices were in the locality.

Satisfied that the place was not bugged, April skirted the room. Convinced that the place really was empty, she turned back to the hall

boy.

He stood in the middle of the room, his head bowed, trembling in dejected misery.

April Dancer perched herself on the arm of an overstuffed chair, where she could keep both the Chinaman and the girl from THRUSH under surveillance. Despite her sincere offer to work with the THRUSH woman against the men from Project X, she knew better than to trust the blonde.

"What is in my room?" she asked the house boy.

He swallowed hard and whispered in broken English that some men whom he did not know rigged up a booby trap. When the door was opened a revolver with a silencer on it would fire a bullet into anyone in the doorway.

"How much did they pay you to let them do this?" April Dancer asked.

In a low whisper the man said, "They paid the greatest price a man can ask for. They paid me with my life, for they said they would kill me if I refused to let them sneak up on my floor."

"What did they look like?" April asked.

The man described them minutely. The distinguishing features were a scar on one man's cheek and a mole on the other's chin. They were of foreign extraction. He didn't know the race.

"Does that sound like any of your people?" April asked the THRUSH girl.

The blonde shook her head. "The scar sounds like the Project X man who tried to kill me," she said.

"It looks like our collaboration begins right here," April Dancer said. "If we can pin a murder attempt on the X-men, we can take them out of circulation." She pointed her automatic at the THRUSH girl. "Tell me what you know. How many X-men did you see?"

"I don't know how many there are," the blonde said, frightened now. "All I really know for sure is that this American astronaut was brought down somewhere in Khmerrania by using a fake punch card smuggled in to the computers that calculated his descent angle. No one knows for sure where he landed."

"Not even the Project X-men?" April asked.

The blonde shook her head. "If they knew, they would pick up the space man and there would be no need to waste time trying to get THRUSH and U.N.C.L.E. out of the way. No, they don't know."

April Dancer hesitated. She figured she could pretend to know a lot more. But at the same time April had to ask questions.

"It was too bad, wasn't it?" she said.

The other girl bit at the bait April fed her. "Wasn't it, though," she said bitterly. "If that damned typhoon had not come right at the

wrong moment and disrupted all our tracking devices, we would have had him pinpointed. We figured the Khmerranians would get him first for they know their jungles so well. We don't."

"Then you intended to steal him from the Khmerranians before they could deliver the astronaut to the Project X team?" April said.

"Something like that," the blonde said evasively.

April let it pass. "Do you know where the X team comes from?"

The blonde looked at April Dancer. "I know they are employed by a South American dictator who hopes the secret of the cosmic ray condensers will make him ruler of the world, but I don't know which country is involved."

April Dancer now turned to the man. "I will not report you to the police if you will do what I tell you. I want you to trap these men. You help me and you will find I am more generous than these thieves and killers." She put her gun in her bag and took out a twenty dollar American bill. It was a fortune to a laboring Chinese in refugee jammed Hong Kong.

The hall boy reached for it eagerly. But his reach became a lunge. April Dancer realized too late that he had tricked her. He was no innocent hall boy. He moved like lightning and caught her out stretched hand and slung her brutally back against the girl from THRUSH.

Both young women were thrown on the floor. The purse containing the deadly pellet gun was knocked out of April's hand. She twisted frantically trying to snatch it back.

Before she could, April found herself looking into the muzzle of a deadly little gun that suddenly materialized in the man's hand.

"Make the slightest move and I'll kill you both!" he said.

His voice was no longer shaking. He straightened up dropping his cringing manner so that he looked ten years younger than he had a moment before. The broken English accent was gone. He spoke English with the slightest Spanish accent.

"Get up!" he snapped. "And now move back against that wall. A little closer together, please. I want both of you in my sight."

Still covering the two young women, he stepped over to a telephone on an end table across the room. He dialed jerkily, eyeing the girls. His number answered almost immediately.

"Get me *Numero Cinco*!" he said harshly. While he waited for his party to come to the phone, he smiled across at the two girls.

"For two organizations as famous as U.N.C.L.E. and THRUSH, I am surprised to find such fools," he said contemptuously. "I am glad that I stayed myself after I set the booby trap in your room. Now I will get the credit for your capture!"

He started to say something else, but someone on the other end of

the line started to talk.

The THRUSH girl was trembling slightly. April had a better grip on herself, but she was no less concerned about the desperateness of their situation. This man was a killer. It showed in his soulless eyes.

April's purse with the pellet gun and her protective devices still lay on the rug, where it slid when knocked from her hand. She measured the distance with her eyes. It was too far away to risk a break. Their captor still had his gun pointed straight at them.

"Yes?" he said into the phone.

"Number Five? This is Twelve. The girl from U.N.C.L.E. was suspicious. She did not enter the room, but I was too clever for her! She fell into my trap!"

He hesitated a moment, listening to the voice at the other end of the line. Then he smiled, a cruel twist of his thin lips.

"Yes! I have her here as my captive … Yes, thank you, Excellency! You are very kind to say so. I only do my humble best. But there is more. I have captured the girl from THRUSH as well!"

"Thank you! Thank you, Excellency!" he went on. "You are too kind. Yes! What shall I do with them? I can take them out of here in laundry baskets. Then with weights on their legs, their bodies will not float to the surface of the bay until our matter is completed and we have gone!"

He hesitated. A slight shadow flitted across his evil face. April felt a glimmer of hope. As long as they stayed alive there was always a chance! Then she saw the Project X spy smile again.

"Yes, of course, Excellency!" he said. "That is very true. The sharks are quite ravenous in that area! There will then never be any bodies to float and cause future trouble. You think of everything, Excellency!"

He raised his eyes over the phone and smiled at his captives. It was the smile a tiger gives a deer just before he springs.

FIVE

THE KEY TO DEATH

Back in the office of Alexander Waverly at U.N.C.L.E. headquarters, the Operations chief and Mark Slate gave each other a stricken look.

Over the intercom, Randy Kovacs' excited voice repeated: "Yes, sir! She is dead! The report just came in from Mr. Shayer, who was–"

"Shayer! Wait! Who are you talking about?" Waverly demanded. "You didn't mean April Dancer is dead?"

"Oh, no, sir!" Kovacs said has hastily. "I mean the girl you suspected of faking the punch card for the computer that dropped the astronaut in Khmerrania. You'll recall that Mr. Shayer is the CIA under cover man working on the case too."

"How did it happen?" Waverly demanded, his face grim. "We had six people watching her!"

"Someone set the hotel on fire!"

Randy said. "There was all kinds of confusion. Nobody could get down the hall to her room. She burned up!"

"Has the body been recovered?" Waverly asked.

"Yes, sir," Randy said. "It was burned to a crisp, but they know it is she because it is her room and no one saw her leave."

"That proves nothing!" Waverly said. "We cannot afford to assume anything. Have our pathological laboratory assist the police in the autopsy. I have a feeling that she is not dead at all. We have been tricked. Call me just as soon as there is any report of any kind. I don't care how trivial. I want every fact!"

"Yes, sir," Randy said. "I'm sorry I jumped to conclusions. I—"

"Never mind that," the U.N.C.L.E. chief said. "Get moving!"

"Mr. Waverly, I–" Slate began.

"One moment, please," Waverly said. "I am convinced that woman was a very important member of an international spy ring. I cannot believe she is dead."

He punched an orange button on his control console. "Get me Napoleon Solo!" he said to the Communications section.

"This woman was not picked up because we needed her free in hope that other members of the ring would contact her. This would give us a lead to the gang."

"Do we know where the direction for this is coming from?" Slate asked.

"No!" Waverly said. "It appears to be an attempt by a South American dictator to expand his tyranny world-wide. We have two suspects, but have not been able to narrow them down."

"I think I can guess," Mark Slate said.

"Then you know that either of these men is cruel enough to loose this terrible weapon if the world does not give in to his demands."

"Yes!" Mark Slate said, his mind filled with the horror of what might happen. "I was in one of their capitals when the dictator took over. He had over twenty thousand people slaughtered to remove any opposition."

"And he would slaughter twenty million in the world to make his total dictatorship safe if he was successful in blackmailing his way to earth's supremacy."

"But can he successfully operate the death ray condensers?" Slate asked. "Can't we destroy them?"

"They have already been destroyed by telemetered destruct commands from the earth," Waverly said gently. "But this astronaut knows all the secrets. He had to in order to do his work up there. Any competent scientist can take this man's knowledge and reconstruct these damnable machines, including the means of putting them in orbit!"

Before Slate could say anything, Waverly's call to Napoleon Solo was completed. "Go ahead, Mr. Waverly," the chief U.N.C.L.E. enforcement officer said from South America.

Waverly quickly sketched for Napoleon Solo the situation in the Project X affair. "Is it possible for you and Mr. Kuryakin to drop your investigation there? I badly need you to follow up on this supposedly dead girl. I do not believe she died in that fire."

"I'm sure one of us could come," Solo said slowly. "We are running on to something big here. I was just getting ready to report to you. We got a Project X member under a truth serum injection."

"What did you find out?" Waverly asked eagerly.

"It is worse than we thought, sir," Solo said. "It is true that the matter was set up by the dictator, but the real brains behind Project X are just using him to foot the bills. He will be shoved aside. The real directors are convinced that they cannot blackmail their way to power. They want decisive action."

"Were you able to find out what their plan is?" Waverly asked.

"They intend to strike without warning. The cosmic death ray will be focused on every major world capital. London, New Delhi, Paris, Moscow, Washington, Berlin, Vienna and Rome will be destroyed in the opening phase."

"This is terrible, Mr. Solo," Waverly said, almost shaken in spite of his iron control.

“There is worse to come,” Solo’s sober voice said. “On the next pass, when the satellites are in spot position again, they intend to blast every state capital in the United States, and all the provincial capitals in Europe and Asia. They plan to completely disrupt all authority.”

“I see,” Waverly said. “I knew we faced a terrible danger, but I did not know how bad it was.”

“Kuryakin and I are trying to get at the root of the thing here,” Solo said.

“Then you had better stay there,” Waverly said slowly. “Mr. Slate will return to Hong Kong. Miss Dancer has disappeared and we don’t yet know what that means. So we had better bring Mr. Kuryakin here to follow upon the death or disappearance of this punch card girl. She is a definite lead. How much time do we have?”

“Our reluctant informer says these men can have Project X in operation within five days after they secure the astronaut.”

“Impossible!” Waverly said. Mark Slate knew his chief was profoundly disturbed.

“No, sir,” Solo said. “Apparently these men have everything ready to go. They were working on a similar system themselves. You remember the Russians are also. That’s why the U.S. arranged this project to test it.”

“That’s true,” Waverly said. “They were stymied by a fundamental principle,” Solo went on. “Once they get that, then they can adjust their now unworkable system. They estimate it will take only a week.”

“Dreadful!” Waverly said. “It means we must move faster.”

After breaking the circuit to Napoleon Solo in South America, Waverly turned back to Mark Slate.

“Well, that is it, Mr. Slate,” he said. “You must return to Hong Kong at once. That is the gathering point for the vultures waiting to pounce on this unfortunate spaceman. They are all waiting for some clue where to search and then they will all be off in a rush.”

“And in the meantime, just to keep from getting bored, they are eliminating each other,” Slate said,

“Yes,” Waverly said, picking up the unlighted pipe again. “Yes, it would seem so. We are fighting a three-cornered battle, Mr. Slate, Project X men, THRUSH and U.N.C.L.E.”

Waverly looked at his agent from under gray, bushy eyebrows. He rose. “Go back to Hong Kong and await orders,” he said. “If you get a lead, notify us and get going! If we get a lead then we will inform you at once. It will be a three-way race between you. So, Mr. Slate, all the advice and encouragement I can give you is to make a fast break from the starting gate, get in front of the pack, and *stay there*!”

“Yes, sir!” Mark Slate said positively. “You can put your money on it!”

"I know I can, Mr. Slate," Alexander Waverly said quietly.

Then as Mark Slate started to leave, Waverly stopped him. "One moment, Mr. Slate," the U.N.C.L.E. chief said. "There is an emergency message coming in."

Slate came back, but did not sit down. He stood with his hands pressed against the back of the chair he had been occupying. He watched his chief intently.

"Yes?" Waverly said, "This is Section 1, Alexander Waverly."

The message was coming in on a code Slate was not familiar with. He saw Waverly's face grow solemn. Slate's fingers sank into the back of the chair in an unconscious gesture of fear. He was certain the message concerned April Dancer.

Waverly made no comment until the report ended. Then he said, "Thank you. Keep me informed."

Waverly looked up to meet Slate's questioning stare. The U.N.C.L.E. chief shook his head slowly. He picked up the unlighted pipe and then put it down again.

"Yes, it is about April," he said, correctly reading the question in Mark Slate's eyes. "Nothing conclusive. The Hong Kong police report that her room was booby trapped. A policeman was killed when he entered looking for her. They are following a lead that April and another woman–probably the THRUSH girl–were spirited unconscious from the hotel. A laundry truck may have been used. That's the sum total of the investigation at the moment. It is continuing and they promise more concrete information shortly."

"I'll be on the next plane I can take out," Slate said.

"Be on it, Mr. Slate!" Waverly said. "Do all you can for Miss Dancer, but don't forget that your first loyalty belongs to the world."

On the plane to San Francisco Slate received a pen-communicator call from Waverly, reporting that the Hong Kong police reported no luck in tracing April Dancer's abductors.

He called again to U.N.C.L.E. headquarters when he landed in San Francisco. There was no additional information about April Dancer. However, Napoleon Solo replied from South America. He learned that there was great excitement in Project X cells there.

"I suspect from that," Waverly told Slate, "that their Khmerranian allies have gotten a fix on our lost astronaut. If so, they will be communicating with their people in Hong Kong to make contact with the Khmerranians. It is imperative, Mr. Slate, that you stop them!"

The plane was going directly on through to Tokyo and then Hong Kong, but had to refuel for the trans-Pacific hop. The passengers debarked during the servicing. Mark Slate went into the terminal just in time to hear his name paged.

He walked to the service counter. The girl attendant, so lovely in her airline uniform that Mark Slate unconsciously straightened his tie, brought out a package from under the counter. It was about a foot square.

"Who left it?" Slate asked suspiciously.

"A messenger," she said. "Is something wrong?"

"Might be," Slate said softly. "Would you can the police for me please?"

The girl's eyes widened, but otherwise she kept her composure. She reached for the telephone on her desk. She quickly dialed and silently passed the phone to him.

Slate spoke a code that identified him to the police as a man from U.N.C.L.E.

"I received an unsolicited package," Mark Slate said. "Can you send out a man from the bomb squad to take a look at it before I open the thing?"

"You'll get help in a couple of minutes," the police sergeant re plied. "Because we often get bomb scares on these planes we keep an expert at the terminal. He has radiological devices to probe any suspicious packages."

The time estimate was almost perfect. In about two minutes a plain-clothed officer joined Slate. They took the suspect package into a back room. The officer, whose name was Lerner, inspected the wrappings carefully and listened to the contents with a doctor's stethoscope.

"No ticks," he said, looking up at Slate. "Probably isn't operated by clockwork, but that doesn't mean the contents aren't lethal. Had one last week that triggered by acid eating through a cork."

Lerner gingerly lifted the square box and placed it in front of an X-ray screen.

"Stand behind that steel protective plate," he told Slate. "You can never tell about an infernal machine."

He adjusted his dials from behind a similar screen. There was a slight humming noise, and a shadowgraph of the box's interior showed on the fluorescent screen.

"It looks like–" the officer said. "Yes! It sure looks like a severed head! A woman's head!"

"Calling all passengers!" the loud speaker outside broke in. "Flight Number two-oh-one for Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Bangkok is now loading on Ramp–"

"I've got to run," Mark Slate said hastily. "But it's vitally important to me to know whose head that is. I think I know, but I must be sure."

"I don't think you had better leave," the officer said. "The Homicide people will want to ask you some questions."

"This is an emergency," Slate said.

The officer drew his gun. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "You will have to remain."

Outside the loudspeaker droned a warning: "Last call for Flight two oh-one for Tokyo, Hong Kong–"

Slate groaned. He pulled out his pen-communicator to put through an emergency call to Waverly. But he knew that a request could never get through official channels soon enough to get back to the terminal in time for him to make the plane.

For one brief frantic moment he debated making a dash for it in spite of the officer's warning. But he realized that even if Lerner didn't shoot him, as would be the officer's right, the demolition expert had only to call the tower to have the plane stopped.

With the fate of the world's major cities depending on the success of his mission, he knew that the delay could be fatal. He took a deep breath. He realized what he had to do. But he also knew, facing the policeman's gun as he was, that a miscalculation would cause that gun to put a bullet into him.

"Sorry," the policeman said. "You may really be an U.N.C.L.E. operative for all I know. But I don't know. I'll beg your pardon if I'm wrong. You understand."

"Yes but I need to be on that Hong Kong plane." Slate took a deep breath and waited for the break he needed so desperately.

Grimly he thought, "This must be why they sent that grisly thing to me. They wanted me delayed."

He remembered how Napoleon Solo said things appeared to be coming to a head. That meant every split second now became absolutely precious. He closed his eyes and had a horrible vision of monstrous death rays plunging out of the skies on the earth's major cities. Along with that terrible picture, he had a vision of April Dancer in desperate need of his help herself.

"I've got to get away!" he told himself. "*I've got to*–"

SIX

VOYAGE TO-DEATH!

In the hotel room in Kowloon April Dancer had her back to a beautiful view of Hong Kong bay. The view in front of her was just the opposite. It was deadly–the muzzle of a gun held in the hand of a man whose intent was murder!

"Sit down," her captor said. April Dancer turned slowly as if in a daze. Her eyes lighted on her fallen handbag. She half stooped to pick it up, fighting to make her movement seem casual.

"Stop!" her captor cried. "Get away from that purse!"

Reluctantly she dismissed the rash idea. The man was too calm to get rattled easily. April was not averse to taking chances. They were part of her business as an U.N.C.L.E. agent. But she was never foolhardy.

Her calculations now told her that she didn't have a chance. She stepped reluctantly back to sink in to a chair across from the girl from THRUSH.

The Project X spy replaced the telephone and circled the room, where he could stand in a line with both girls. He was taking no chances on their attacking him from different directions.

The THRUSH girl looked across at April. She had regained some of her composure now that the threat of death was postponed temporarily.

"I suppose if we are going to die together we might as well get acquainted," she said. "I'm Avis Avalee. You didn't tell me your name."

As a matter of fact, April knew that Avis knew her name. She suspected that this conversation was intended to lull the Project X spy's suspicions. April wasn't sure just what they could do, but she was willing to grasp any straw.

"I'm April Dancer," she said.

Then, turning to their captor, she asked, "And who are you?"

He smiled, "There is an ancient Chinese proverb to the effect that he who holds his tongue will hold his head the longest."

"Thanks for the advice," April said. "I would like–"

"The advice is worthless for you," he went on with an evil smile. "Those who employ me wish to interrogate the two of you. Once that is done, you will hold your heads no longer."

April smiled thinly. "I just won't talk!"

"Oh, you'll talk," he said in a voice only slightly above a whisper.

“You see, Miss Dancer, I am a student of the classical methods of making criminals talk which were employed in the days of the emperors. My ancestors held hereditary positions in the imperial torture chambers. It is a family pride that everyone ever interrogated by a member of my family in his official duty always talked and talked freely. I do not think I will spoil the family record, Miss Dancer! Oh no indeed! You will talk. I promise it!”

He reached in his pocket and pulled out a tiny bottle. When he uncapped it, a thin green vapor came out. April looked at it anxiously, but their captor was still breathing normally, so she did not suspect its purpose until she started to feel a languor stealing over her.

She tried to get up, but she couldn’t move her limbs. She did not lose consciousness, but the room and the man from Project X shimmered as if she was viewing him through the disturbed waters of a pool.

She was aware of the two men who came into the room, but she could not make out their faces. Their voices were scarcely distinguishable to the partially paralyzed girl.

“This is a rare catch, Chu, one of the men said. “We have a supply of truth serum on the junk. I think we will get some valuable information before we take care of them!”

“I hoped I would be permitted to go along,” the Chinese spy said eagerly.

“You can join us later,” the man said. “For the moment there may be an investigation into their disappearance. I want you here to throw the investigators off the track. You have made arrangements for us to get these women out of the hotel without being observed?”

“Definitely, Senor Pedrito,” Chu said quickly. “There is a freight elevator in the rear. I have made financial arrangements with the operator to take you down. The laundry baskets are in the adjoining utility room. The truck is scheduled to arrive in precisely ten minutes. The driver has been paid sufficiently to insure his complete cooperation. “

“Good,” Pedrito said. “You will be taken care of in the proper manner.”

“Oh, thank you, sir!” the Chinese spy said.

“Yes, like this!” Pedrito said. He pulled a curious-looking gun from his pocket.

Chu’s eyes bulged. “Who–?” he began.

His words ended in a gurgle as a silent projectile burst from the end of the gun and buried itself in his chest. He collapsed on the floor, spurting blood.

Pedrito said, “Gather up anything that belongs to the girls. I don’t want them connected with this rat’s death.”

The other man picked up April's purse. She saw him open it. His image was a vague, fluid outline, but she could see sufficiently to realize he had found the pellet gun built into the clasp. He showed it to Pedrito.

Pedrito grunted. "U.N.C.L.E. has some tricky kids," he said. "Tear it out. Our laboratory men will want to look at it. And I'll take that automatic in there too."

"She's got a transistor radio that I want–"

"Nothing doing!" Pedrito snapped. "Put that stuff back. I want that stuff to go overboard with her. I don't want any evidence on you that the police might find later and connect with her."

The following events were not clear in April Dancer's mind. She knew that they were being taken from the delivery panel truck and loaded on some kind of a boat. She could hear the wooden hull creak. The lap-lap of water was also plainly audible. She was starting to hear better. This gave her some hope that the paralyzing gas was wearing off. However, she still could not move her limbs.

As she was carried across the deck, April caught a glimpse of the mast with its lowered sail. She knew then that they were aboard a Chinese fishing junk.

They were carried into the stern cabin. It was dark inside, almost pitch black when a heavy woven curtain was pulled down over the door to the deck.

"Do not move!" a harsh voice spoke out of the darkness.

For a long moment there was no sound. Then a brilliant ray of light shot into their faces. It played across each of their faces and then went out.

There was another silence, broken only by the lap of water on the junk's teakwood hull and the rasping breath of their captors. The men who brought them were deathly afraid. April, who was beginning to regain more of her senses, could feel the slight tremor in the hands of the man who held her.

"Report!" The word lashed out of the darkness.

Pedrito, as fawning before this man as the Chinese spy had been in front of him, stuttered slightly as he told how the two girls were captured. The story was essentially true, except his own role was magnified in importance.

"I brought them here instead of killing them instantly because I thought we might learn something from them," he concluded.

"For once you have done well," the deathlike voice said. "I am most curious to know why agents from THRUSH and U.N.C.L.E. were working together. If these two enemies of ours have joined forces, then we must take definite precautions."

There was another silence in the pitch-black cabin. Then the

spectral voice said, “Did you have to use the Green Gas on them?”

“Yes, lord,” Pedrito replied, “They were gassed about an hour ago. It will be at least a half hour before they fully recover.”

“That means it will be that long before we can interrogate them,” the deathly voice said. “Place them in the hold. And you–”

In the background a tiny chime tinkled. April’s straining ears caught the sound of rustling silk as the master of the boat moved. She heard the click of a switch. Then a voice, tinny from a poorly tuned speaker, said: “There is a message, master! Code AAA!”

“Give it to me!” the death voice said hollowly.

“Number XIII reports from Site G in Khmerrania that Khmerranian searchers have located the astronaut’s space capsule!”

“The man! The man in the capsule, you fool! What about him! Everything depends upon the astronaut himself! Did they find him? Is he still alive?”

There was deep anxiety in the spy master’s voice.

“No, master,” the radioed voice replied. “He came down alive. That much we know. He left the capsule. He is somewhere in the jungle. The Khmerranians are searching for him.”

“Tell Site G to send out a searching party himself,” the Project X area chief ordered. “Leave nothing to chance. Both U.N.C.L.E. and THRUSH are after this man also. We must find him first. Project X–depends upon our getting this man first!”

“I will relay the message, master.”

“And we will join the search as well. There is no more point in staying here. The British harbor police intercept any boats that sail in the night. We will leave at dawn and will land at Point Four. Notify Post G that we will join them in the search.”

After he ended the conversation the spy master said to Pedrito, “Get these girls below. It is essential that I know how much THRUSH and U.N.C.L.E. have found out. As soon as you have found out all you can from them, I want both women disposed of as soon as we are outside the bay.”

“It shall be done, master,” Pedrito said.

Ordering the men who accompanied him to bring April and Avis, Pedrito led them down a ladderway into the junk’s hold. One of the men lighted a candle which was not permitted in the cabin. Pedrito opened another hatch in the floor. They went down another ladderway into the lower hold.

April realized then that this was not one of the low fishing junks, but a cargo ship, probably made to carry rice between Thailand and Hong Kong. There were a few bales of rice still in the hold. Several empty fiber rice sacks were thrown in one corner. Both girls were dumped unceremoniously on the teak deck. The candle was stuck on a

beam where Pedrito could watch them. The two coolies who carried them down squatted on their heels to the side and watched Pedrito with an unblinking stare.

April watched them through barely slitted eyelids. Already she was beginning to feel some life returning to her paralyzed limbs. She did not dare move to test how much strength had come back, but an electric-like tingle in her arms and legs told her that the nerve gas was wearing off.

She anxiously measured the distance between herself and Pedrito.

"I could get him, I think," she told herself silently.

An expert judo and karate practitioner, she felt that with surprise on her side she could overpower the big Spaniard. However, there still were two coolies with the ugly knives in their belts.

She wished desperately that she could find her purse. It was stuffed with the assorted protective devices all U.N.C.L.E. agents carry. As it was, she still had a finger ring with a hidden needle to inject either truth serum or knockout drops, and a wrist watch that concealed an ultra-miniature tape recorder. Neither seemed of much value to her then.

What April wished desperately to get were the smoke bombs made in the form of a package of mints or the explosives disguised as chewing gum.

Both, however, were in the handbag. She had not seen it since the man with Pedrito had picked it up in the hotel room.

Time, April knew, was running out fast. She doubted that the lost astronaut could evade capture much longer. Once the men from Project X got their hands on him, it would be too late. She had a horrible vision of the stricken world ruled by men like the death-voiced inhuman who spoke out of the darkness above.

In spite of her iron self-control, April Dancer shuddered. She kept her eyes slitted, her long lashes disguising the fact that she was watching every movement of her captors. More and more feeling was slowly coming back into her limbs.

As her control returned, April's mind went back to her original speculation about trying to knock Pedrito out with karate. There was a distinct possibility that she might get away with it if she could move fast enough to knock over and extinguish the candle before the murderous coolies slashed their knives into her.

In the course of her work with U.N.C.L.E. she had taken many chances with her life, but she never made a move without convincing herself that she had a chance. That was all she asked for–a chance.

Now she lay on the hard teakwood deck of the junk's hold, watching the three men and trying to decide if she really did have a chance.

What would it gain her to kill Pedrito, if she were still trapped in the hold, unable to communicate with Mr. Waverly in New York?

Each passing minute was making the situation more desperate. She fought down the impulse to swing into action anyway. Each second dragged on leadened feet as she waited, praying for a break that would give her the barest hope of winning through. It was not sufficient to overcome her captors here in the junk's hold. The important thing was to contact Mr. Waverly and let him know that the Khmerranians were closing in on the lost astronaut.

To do this she had to have her purse with its pen-communicator. That, she fearfully suspected, was back in the junk's cabin with the man with the spectral voice. She almost shivered as she considered the odds against her. How was it possible, even if she was lucky enough to overcome three husky men, to open the trap door into the blacked-out cabin and capture the well protected spy master of Project X?

"There's always a way!" It was Alexander Waverly speaking out of the depth of her memory. She could see the seamed face of the U.N.C.L.E. chief as he said those fateful words. She had been a student then at U.N.C.L.E.'s academy. "There's always a way," he had said in a lecture to the students. "Provided you have the intelligence to find it, and equally important, the courage to follow the way when you do find it."

Suddenly the slight margin she asked for presented itself. Her lightning mind grabbed it automatically without pausing to review the objections to it.

Avis Arvalee moved her legs, coming out of her own paralysis.

"Grab her!" Pedrito commanded the coolies. "I can inject the truth serum now!"

He pulled a small black case from his inside pocket as the two men grabbed the THRUSH girl's arms and legs. Avis screamed and tried to struggle.

In that moment when everybody's attention was on Avis, April tensed. They thought she was still under the gas influence. She pushed up on her hands without either of the three seeing her.

She hurled herself at the nearest coolie whose back was to her, ignoring Pedrito. She caught the surprised Chinese and swung him around in a well executed judo throw. She hurled him straight into Pedrito as the burly Spaniard jumped to his feet. Both men fell sprawling.

April whirled. She had gambled that the other coolie would not be able to get away from Avis quickly enough to endanger her attack.

But the THRUSH woman was too frightened to do her part well. She should have grabbed the coolie. Instead she let him jump back.

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. couldn't follow. Pedrito and the other

Chinese were not out. They were scrambling back to their feet. The free Chinese jerked a kris-like dagger from his belt and sprang at her.

April retreated, kicking at the candle stuck on the deck. She hoped to extinguish it. In the pitch darkness, she might have a chance against the three of them.

But her kick sent the candle flying. It landed in the stack of dry fiber rice sacks thrown against the side of the ship's wooden hull. The fire flared up.

Pedrito hesitated, looking back fearfully at the blazing fire. But the coolies ignored its danger to them. They sprang at April, closing in from two directions.

Avis came out of her funk sufficiently to help a little. She grabbed at the coolie's leg, upsetting him. The second charged at April, swinging a murderous knife that was the twin of the one carried by his companion.

Pedrito drew a tiny automatic from his pocket. It was the one he took from April's purse. She saw him level it at her!

April threw herself to the deck, kicking a hidden catch in her shoe heel that released a razor-sharp blade that shot out of her heel like a switch-blade knife.

Pedrito's bullet whined over her head, just missing her as she hit the deck. The charging Chinese was oblivious to his own danger from Pedrito's shooting.

The Spaniard yelled a string of curses as the coolie got in his line of fire. He held up his shots, stepping hastily to the side to get another shot at her.

As the Chinese man stooped to disembowel her with the knife, April twisted, bringing her knife-heel up in a desperate slash that caught the unbalanced man in the stomach. He fell with a strangled cry on top of April.

She tried to shove him aside so she could dodge Pedrito's bullets. She couldn't move fast enough. The wildly cursing X-man leveled the gun at her again.

Across from them the, other coolie jerked free of Avis' frantic grasp. He stepped hastily back to swing a decapitating blow at her head.

April grabbed the dead Chinese by the hair, frantically trying to hold his body around as a shield between her and the murderous Spaniard, It was a forlorn chance. She knew she was lost.

A gun exploded–twice. Surprised, April saw the bullet plow not into her, but into Pedrito. He fell, clutching at the spurting wound in his stomach. The second shot splattered the face of the Chinese swinging at Avis.

April Dancer looked up, hopefully. "It's Mark!" she thought, with a

rush of relief. “Somehow he–”

Then her hope crashed. The trap door was open above the ladder way. She heard the furious voice of the master: “I told that fool I wanted these women questioned before they were killed! Let this be a lesson to the rest of you. Follow my orders to the letter–or die!”

Then she heard him issue orders for men she couldn’t see to go down and put out the fire. “And put those women where they can’t do more harm!” he added.

The fire was burning madly now, eating into the teakwood. Smoke was rising, putting a veil between her and the trap door above. She scrambled back, grabbing the automatic that had fallen from Pedrito’s dying fingers.

She snatched it up, pointing the barrel toward a sailor coming down the ladderway.

“Stop!” she cried.

The sailor hesitated, and started to cough from the thickening smoke gathering at the top of the hold.

“Are you more afraid of her than me!” the spectral voice snarled.

The sailor started to climb down. April fired. Her bullet slammed into the man. He fell. Two more, urged on by threats of the spy master, followed. April shot them both.

And then the gun was empty. She hurled it at the next man, and jerked off her shoe, grabbing the toe to use the switch-blade knife in the heel for a last ditch fight.

There was a rush of men down the ladderway. Three converged on her from different directions. There was now so much smoke in the hold that she couldn’t see how Avis was making out.

April slashed wildly. She cut two men badly before they bore her down to the deck and jerked the shoe-knife from her hands. She fought with all her strength, but they slowly brought her under control.

Another man came down the ladder, dragging a three-inch hose. He yelled in Chinese for someone on deck to start the pump to pull in sea water to fight the raging fire.

April relaxed, trying to lull her captors into believing she had exhausted herself. Then she heaved her body, jerking one leg free. She slammed her foot full in the face of one man. He fell back, blood streaming from his nose.

The man with the hose shouted again for water. Someone on deck screamed back an answer that April did not catch.

Then suddenly the junk lurched. The weakened hull beyond the raging fire gave way. The hold was below the water level. The sea broke through with a tremendous surge.

The incoming water hit them with the fury of a hard surf. They

were swept back. April hit against the stacks of rice. Someone on deck slammed down the trap door. The horseman, scrambling up the ladder, squalled in fear as he pressed the door for freedom and didn't get it.

The water rose quickly. April managed to keep her head above the churning water. The junk was sinking fast. The keel struck the bottom of the shallow bay and the hull tilted crazily.

This, she knew, might save those on deck, but here she and Avis were trapped below the waterline.

The sea was not pouring in so badly now and April found herself caught in a corner of the hold right against the underside of the cabin deck. The water, rising in the hold, had pushed the air in a compressed mass so there was about a foot clearance where she could breathe.

Then she heard the rasping breath of someone else in the same precarious haven. She tensed, clinching her fist, determined to fight to the very last moment of her life.

It was a whimper and April Dancer knew that it was Avis.

"Avis!" she said quickly. "Hang on! We'll get out yet. As soon as the water stabilizes on the inside and outside of the junk, we can dive down and–I hope and pray–swim out through the hole in the side."

"I–I thought we were dead!"

Avis gasped. "I can hardly keep afloat. Can you help me just a little?"

"I think so," April said.

She moved over against the girl from THRUSH. Too late she realized her mistake. Avis's hand twisted in April's wet hair. The THRUSH agent jerked April's head back, jamming the girl from U.N.C.L.E.'S temple against the hard teak.

Fire exploded in April's brain. Desperately she tried to clutch her enemy to keep from sinking. Avis struck her in the face and pushed April away from her.

April was dazed, but not completely unconscious. She tried to keep her head up, but Avis pushed her brutally under the water.

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. started to sink.

SEVEN

TRAPPED!

The head in the box shipped to Mark Slate in San Francisco was that of a woman–young, about twenty-three. The homicide investigator was apologetic to Mark, but insisted that the man from U.N.C.L.E. remain in the city.

"You will recall that CIA scandal last week," he said pointedly. "There is no doubt that you are associated with U.N.C.L.E., but this other thing put us in a very bad light with the public. This other man belonged to a highly placed organization too, but that did not prevent him from being a murderer. We can't afford to take a chance on having another blow-up like that."

"But I must get to Hong Kong!" Slate said, almost in desperation.

"There is no such thing as an indispensable person," the homicide chief said pointedly. "If U.N.C.L.E.'s operations depends upon you alone, then they had better close down."

Mark Slate groaned. For a moment he considered bolting for the door. He realized, however, that it would be useless. Even if he escaped the bullets and got aboard the airliner, the police would radio the pilot to delay takeoff.

"Can't you call U.N.C.L.E. headquarters?" he asked desperately. "Mr. Waverly–"

"We have contacted Waverly," Burr, the homicide chief, said. "He is disturbed. He must have spent some time on the waterfront. He has a wonderful command of language when he is disturbed. But we aren't budging. You see, Mr. Slate, we received a phone call which claimed a young woman fitting the description of this face was threatened by you in a New York nightclub last night."

"But you can't jail a man because of an anonymous phone call!" Slate snapped.

"Who said you were being jailed?" Burr replied smoothly. "We are investigating. And you are a suspect. You see, our informant said he was also calling the newspapers. So with the story breaking we have no alternative but to hold you at least long enough to assure the public that this isn't another case like the one that just embarrassed us. If we we're wrong, we'll apologize."

"Great!" Slate groaned. "And in the meantime the fate of the world hangs in the balance! It would take another twenty-four hours before Waverly could get another agent in from South America, brief him and get him to Hong Kong. Time means everything in this case!"

“You are not getting out of here until this thing clears up,” Burr said pointedly. “You might be a little more cooperative, for your own good.”

“Sorry,” Slate said. “I know what you are up against. I agree with you from your standpoint, but must disagree from mine. However, what can I do?”

“The first thing is to identify her. There must be some connection between you or the killer would not have sent the head to you,” Burr pointed out.

“Then you are admitting I didn’t kill her,” Slate said quickly.

“I said there must be a connection!” Burr snapped. “Now if you expect to get out of here, tell me what it is!”

“There couldn’t!” Slate began in a heated voice and then stopped as an uneasy idea occurred to him.

“Yes?” Burr said, leaning forward eagerly as he noted Slate’s hesitation.

“There just might be a connection,” Slate said hesitantly. “Were there any distinguishing marks on the girl’s head?”

“A slight scar just above the left eyebrow,” Burr said. “Would you like to look?”

“No,” Slate said quickly, “but I’d like to call U.N.C.L.E. headquarters.”

“Go ahead,” Burr said.

Slate pulled out his pen-communicator and in three seconds had his contact with Alexander Waverly in New York.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Slate, “Waverly said, a snap in his voice betraying his extreme irritation. “We will have you released shortly. I am trying to contact the attorney general now. The situation is unfortunate, but we can hardly blame the San Francisco police. This other affair has put the police in an awkward spot. They must bend over backward not to arouse further public resentment toward them.”

“What I called about was to ask if the girl burned in that hotel fire was really the spy who placed the fake punch card in the astronaut’s computer.”

“No,” Waverly replied. “Dental teeth records showed it was not. Another body was put there to throw us off. We haven’t identified the body yet.”

“Then did this spy have any distinguishing marks on her face?”

“I would have to check the computer to be sure,” Waverly said, “but I think she had been in a car accident once. There was a small scar on her face above one of the eyes.”

“That’s what I wanted to know!” Mark Slate said. “They did kill her after all–and shipped her head to me!”

There was a silence at the other end of the transmitter. Slate said

sharply: “Mr. Waverly? Are you there?”

“Yes, I am here,” Alexander Waverly said. “This is dreadful, Mr. Slate. I hoped that she was still alive. We needed her to lead us to the men who hired her. We seem to be losing our leads, Mr. Slate. And time is running out very fast.”

“Can you get positive identification out here for this girl?” Slate asked. “I think that will be sufficient to get me released.”

“I am sure of it. It will be sent by wirephoto. I will get the CIA to release a newspaper story that she was a spy. That will take press pressure off the false claim about you,” Waverly said.

“I’ll get the next plane out to Hong Kong,” Mark Slate replied.

“No,” Waverly said. “I can arrange for the Air Force to fly you to Hawaii in a jet fighter. If we can get you released within the next thirty minutes–and I’m sure we can–you can catch up with your regular plane at Honolulu International Airport.”

Mark Slate landed in Hawaii just in time to climb aboard his plane. A hasty check back with Waverly in New York informed him that there was still no word from April. He called again from Tokyo with the same results.

The last call brought him the sobering news that there had been an attempt on Napoleon Solo’s life in South America. And the plane bringing Illya Kuryakin back to New York was bombed, but managed to make a successful landing.

Before Slate’s plane left Haneda International Airport in Tokyo, grim-faced police came aboard for a minute check. They gave no reason for the shakedown, but he was certain that Waverly had requested it through the Tokyo U.N.C.L.E. office.

Just before going through customs in Hong Kong, Slate contacted Waverly again.

“We have just received a tip that two men, definitely identified as THRUSH agents, suddenly left Hong Kong a half hour ago,” Waverly told him.

“Any idea of their destination?” Slate asked.

“They claimed to be headed for Macao by chartered boat. However, they never arrived.” He lowered his voice. “I think they have a lead on this lost astronaut,” Waverly said. “If so, they have a jump on us–unless by some miracle, April is alive.”

“She has to be,” Slate said quietly.

“Call me when you get to Hong Kong,” Waverly said. “We may have some word on Miss April Dancer.”

Mark Slate understood full well how desperate the situation was becoming. Everything depended on recovering the lost astronaut before either the men from Project X or THRUSH found him. Yet,

every indication was that their enemies had a lead that he did not have himself.

Slate had been in Hong Kong so often that the customs inspectors recognized him. He was waved through without any formality of checking his baggage. His passport was stamped with an entry visa and quickly handed back to him.

He headed for the taxi stand. As he left the building, someone called his name.

He whirled and saw the girl. To his amazement he realized it was the same one he and April had caught listening in on their conversation when he left Hong Kong. The last he had seen of her, April Dancer was forcing the suspicious girl into the taxicab. Thank God, now this girl might lead him to April. She was the very person he wanted to question.

She was an extremely attractive young woman, but she looked exhausted. Her face was drawn. Her voice held an infinite weariness and her dress looked wrinkled.

"Mr. Slate?" she said again.

"Yes."

"Could I speak to you for a few minutes?" she said in a low voice. "Somewhere that cannot be bugged."

"Yes, of course," Slate said.

"You want April Dancer?"

Mark Slate hesitated. "Yes," he said slowly.

"That is what I want to talk to you about," she said. "I know what happened to April Dancer. I have a last message to you from her."

Slate's heart jumped. "Then April is–?"

"Dead?" the girl said. "Yes, she is dead. I know because I was with her. I am Avis Avalee. I was with her when you left."

"Yes," Slate said cautiously. He gave her a careful, suspicious look. She had obviously been through a difficult time. She looked so weary that it seemed she might drop in her tracks at any moment. She gave the impression of not having had any sleep for days. She kept pressing her hand to her side as if to smother pain.

And he could see the edge of an ugly bruise that her hair was combed down to hide.

"Can we go somewhere to talk?" she asked again–her voice little more than a whisper.

"You are from THRUSH," he said. "How can I trust you?"

"April Dancer did."

"And went to her death–by your story!"

She shook her head. "April died because of what she insisted on doing. I tried to dissuade her–and couldn't. It killed her and almost killed me!"

Mark Slate stared at her. His mind desperately fought the idea that April Dancer was dead. But all his attempts to catch some betraying mannerism in Avis Avalee were not successful.

She just seemed so weary that her mind and face were blank. Slate found it impossible to decide if she was lying.

"I can't stand here until I drop!" she said. "If you don't want–"

"Okay!" Slate said, making a sudden decision.

He called Waverly and made a quick report. Avis listened impassively as Mark Slate aired his suspicions of her to the U.N.C.L.E. chief. He made no attempt to keep her from hearing him.

"We will go to the Peninsular Hotel in Kowloon," Slate told Waverly. "I will leave a connection open so you can hear everything we say to each other."

"Excellent," Waverly said. "I will alert the Hong Kong police. I will arrange for a police escort for you from the airport to the hotel. I want them watching you while you are with this woman from THRUSH. This could be a desperate trap. When you have completed your interview with her, you can dismiss the police guard."

Within minutes he was given a police car to take him to the hotel. When he and Avis were seated in the back, he said: "What happened to April?"

"She tried to capture a Project X cell. They killed her."

"You were with her?"

"Yes."

"How did it happen that a girl from U.N.C.L.E. and a girl from THRUSH should be working together?"

"X is a common enemy," Avis replied.

"April is not the kind of girl who would compromise with THRUSH," Slate pointed out quickly.

"She didn't compromise. I did."

"Yeah?" Mark Slate said skeptically.

"I want to tell you the whole story," Avis said hurriedly.

"It *might* help me believe you," Slate said.

"You know enough about THRUSH to know that they can be very brutal to operatives who fail."

"Yes," Mark Slate said.

"I failed."

"Yes?"

"They're going to liquidate me."

"So?"

"So I made a deal with April Dancer."

"What kind of a deal?"

"I would give her a lead on Project X. In return she would get U.N.C.L.E. to protect me from THRUSH's vengeance."

"What did you tell her about X?" Slate asked.

"That Project X is a scheme by a group of renegade scientists operating under cover of the dictatorship of the Republic of Miranda in South America. They are trying to steal the secret of cosmic death rays from the United States in order to set up a world dictatorship of their own. They intend to totally destroy every major world capital on earth."

Slate watched Avis intently as she spoke. So far everything she said fitted with the information Waverly gave him. She seemed sincere. He was at a loss to determine if she really had broken with THRUSH or was attempting to lead him into a trap.

As yet she had not asked him to do anything that might turn out to be a THRUSH snare.

"Go on," he said.

"The secret is held by an astronaut the Project X people stole out of orbit by using an incorrectly punched computer data card," she said. "This man came down in Khmerrania. Since this country does not maintain normal diplomatic relations with the United States, Prince Thorn will not permit American rescue units to cross his border. The United States cannot force its way in, because your president cannot afford to admit publically that such a weapon is in space."

"All of this, of course, is common knowledge to all of us involved," Mark Slate said hurriedly. "Nothing you have told me would induce April to trust you."

"I gave her a coded message from Project X's Station G in Khmerrania to its Hong Kong cell," Avis replied. "This message said that the Khmerranian searchers had found the capsule and were closing in on the astronaut."

This information Slate wanted to have, at last. "Is that true?" he asked sharply.

"Yes!" she said. "If you don't move fast, you've lost!"

He picked up the pen-communicator which had been left open with the antenna extended.

"Mr. Waverly?" he said into the tiny speaker. "Did you hear that?"

"Yes, Mr. Slate," the U.N.C.L.E. chief said. "One moment. I have asked the enemy-reference computers to prepare a summary of our information on Miss Avalee."

While he waited for the report from U.N.C.L.E. headquarters, Mark Slate asked Avis, "What did April do when you gave her this information?"

"She wanted to find out where the capsule was found. She said you would be returning today. She wanted the place pinpointed so you could go there."

"And what did she do?"

“I told her about the waterfront attack on me, and she decided the X-men were using a junk in the harbor for their cell station.”

“And you went there?”

“I didn’t want to go,” she said miserably. “April insisted. We were at the Aberdeen docks on the other side of Victoria Island. We were looking for the boat when they jumped us.”

“Why did you go?”

“I was afraid not to,” Avis replied, closing her eyes and leaning back in the car seat.

“How do you know for sure that April is dead?”

Avis hesitated. Slate’s throat tightened as he leaned forward.

“There was blood on her head,” Avis said. “They carried her on the boat. I heard one of them say they would dump her in the bay.”

“Then she might not have been dead when they carried her aboard?” he asked eagerly. His spirits started a rebound.

Avis shrugged. “If she wasn’t, she had to be shortly after. They could not afford to let her live.”

For a brief second or two Mark Slate turned this over in his mind. Thoughtfully his right hand twisted a massive black star sapphire ring on his left hand. Its massive setting concealed a tiny needle and a reservoir of Tru-line, a special U.N.C.L.E.-developed truth serum infinitely superior to sodium pentothal.

“Are you willing to submit to questioning under truth serum?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said without hesitation.

Her ready answer gave Slate another chill. He wondered uneasily if her story of April Dancer’s death could be true? He was in an agony of suspense. Yet he knew, even if she did not, that his talk of using truth serum to test her story was temporary bluff.

In her exhausted condition he could not afford to use the serum. Her fatigue made it impossible to get dependable answers. He would have to wait until she was rested. That would be at least until morning.

Suddenly he made his decision. There was too much at stake to wait for verification of her betrayal of THRUSH. If April Dancer were still alive, every second was vital.

“Okay,” he said. “I’m going to back you. I hope for both of our sakes that you have been leveling with me.”

“I have!” she cried. “You don’t know–you can’t possibly know the terror of living with those madmen from THRUSH! You are not a human being. You are a robot they move by pushing buttons!”

“Mr. Slate!” the voice of Alexander Waverly came from the pen. “We have a probability from the computer.”

“Yes, sir?” Slate said eagerly.

"It is inconclusive. You must draw your own conclusions from your personal contact. According to the machine she could or could not be sincere. However–"

"Yes, sir?"

"In making your decision whether to depend upon her information, do not be misled by external emotions she displays. This woman was an excellent actress before she was recruited by THRUSH. In fact it was her histrionic ability they wanted. Good luck, Mr. Slate."

Avis heard Waverly's report. Mark Slate looked at her closely. She gave no sign that the U.N.C.L.E. chief's report disturbed her.

Slate settled back in the car seat. He said no more until the police car deposited them at the hotel entrance on Salisbury Road. At the end of the street the Star Ferry building tower loomed up against the evening sky. The lights of ships in the channel spread soft gleams in the water. Beyond the city lights climbed stair-step fashion up the hills of Victoria Island. Hong Kong harbor, night or day, is one of the most beautiful man-made sights in the world.

After they registered at the hotel, Mark Slate and Avis went to the second floor. Far enough down the corridor so that the hall boy could not hear them, he stopped Avis. The bellhop went on with the luggage. The U.N.C.L.E. agent extended the antenna on his pen-communicator and twisted the cap slightly so it tuned out U.N.C.L.E. headquarters and brought in a commercial radio circuit.

With the noise to drown out their voices if any bugs were near, Slate said, "I must take action immediately. Do you feel equal to guiding me to the place where April Dancer was captured? I've got to start somewhere. That seems the most likely place. But if you're too ex–"

"I can make it," she said quickly.

"Okay," Mark Slate said decisively. "As soon as the bellhop deposits your baggage, go at once to the back hall stairs. The Hong Kong police are not supposed to trail me, but I think they will. They have a stake in this thing too. I'm going to shake them. I know a good way out."

Avis nodded. In spite of her genuine weariness, she seemed pleased.

Mark Slate continued on to the room assigned him, but only stayed long enough to make another report to Waverly.

"Mr. Kuryakin will join you in Hong Kong in about twelve hours," the U.N.C.L.E. chief said. "It is imperative, Mr. Slate, that we find out where that capsule is down. I know how you feel about April Dancer, but regardless of the danger she may be in, if she is alive, we must consider humanity first. Simultaneous death ray attacks on all the world's capitals will destroy millions of people, Mr. Slate. U.N.C.L.E. is

all that stands between these people and certain death. You must find us a lead before Mr. Kuryakin arrives."

"I understand, sir," Slate said. "Avis' story that the X-men are on a junk near Aberdeen Bay is all the lead I have. I'm checking it out."

"With her?" Waverly said. "Be careful, Mr. Slate."

"I intend to be."

He picked up Avis, and went down a service stairs after bribing the hall boy to be quiet. They came out back of the kitchen. A short walk up the alley and they headed across to the Star Ferry. They sailed across the beautiful bay. Avis slept most of the time.

On the Victoria side they got a taxi and headed across the island to Aberdeen. They skirted the quay and drove past the tangle of fishing junks. Across the water they could see the lights of the famous floating restaurants.

Farther down the bay Avis indicated a godown which looked like a rice warehouse. Slate got out and gave the driver orders to take Avis back to Kowloon. She tried to argue, but he refused to take her with him.

He blended into the shadows, going past the suspected place. Then he doubled back. His practiced eye had spotted an opening.

There was a fire ladder on an adjoining building. He went up it, crossed the roof, leaped the seven foot distance between the two buildings, swung down and through a broken loft window. The place was jammed with stacked rice bags. He felt his way through the darkness. Below he could see a glimmer of light from what seemed a lower level office.

The ground floor was also jammed with stacks of rice bags. He moved silently down the passage between the stacks. His gun was pulled, but snapped from lead to paralyzing pellets. What he needed so desperately was information. He could not afford to kill any suspect except as an absolutely last resort.

Slate moved cautiously. Suddenly he stopped. There was someone in the passageway in front of him. All he could see of this person was a dark shape. He first thought it might be the Chinese watchman. Then he saw a hand raise. There was a gun in it. The gun was not the type a watchman would carry. It closely resembled the THRUSH special.

"Then she did lead me into a trap!" Slate thought grimly.

His bitter thoughts were not directed at Avis. After all, she was doing her job in trapping him. His disgust was directed at himself. She had fooled him completely. There had been such a sincere air about her claim to hate THRUSH that he had actually believed her.

He took a deep breath. Although the gun resembled the THRUSH weapon, it was not one.

“What she has done,” he thought, “was to head me toward a Project X cell. A clever little trick to get her opposition to kill each other off!”

He glimpsed the gun-bearing shadow only for a second. Then it was gone. Slate pressed back against the rice bales, waiting grimly for another sign of movement.

He clutched his own gun tightly, ready to fire at a second’s notice.

EIGHT

NEPTUNE'S DAUGHTER

The splashing water in the hull of the sinking junk closed over April Dancer's head after the treacherous blow from Avis Avalee. The girl from U.N.C.L.E. sank down several feet.

She did not lose consciousness, although Avis' savage attack left her dazed. She had the presence of mind left to hold her breath when she went under. The water against her face helped bring back her faculties. She fought against the terrible burning in her chest as her lungs screamed for air.

She paddled backward, swimming under water until she bumped the opposite bulkhead. Her head broke out into the open again. For a few anxious seconds she could do nothing but gasp for breath.

The water was still rising. April's head bumped the lower part of the cabin deck overhead. Even then she could not get her chin out of the rising flood. Her head ached unmercifully from the battering against the hull. She knew she could only breathe by turning on her back and ramming her nose directly against the roof. It was only a matter of seconds before the hole would be completely filled.

April Dancer took a deep breath, pulling as much precious air into her lungs as she could. She was sure that Avis had swum through the burned hole in the hull. But then the girl from THRUSH was not laboring under the twin handicaps of a battered head and overtaxed lungs.

The junk shuddered. The water splashed over April's head. It subsided slightly, giving the trapped girl time for one last good breath.

The next time it splashed up over her head, April Dancer plunged down. Her senses were confused. She had no idea the direction of the hole. She would have to trust to luck.

She touched the curving teak wood sides and started working her way along. Her lungs were on fire again. Her oxygen-starved heart hammered. She found nothing. She was on the wrong side! She turned, swimming in the opposite direction. She collided with the ladderway.

The jolt almost made her lose her breath. A little water entered her nose. She started to strangle! She turned, pausing momentarily in a desperate attempt to orientate herself. She started to float up, but grabbed the ladder.

The awful hammering in her head made thinking difficult. But she steadied herself and forced her confused mind to work. She tried to

remember which side of the ladder the fire had broken out. It was a simple problem made extraordinarily difficult by the roaring in her head.

Suddenly, she made her decision and turned. It seemed to the trapped girl that she was scarcely moving. She tried to force her tortured body to cut the water faster, but she was rapidly reaching the point of total oxygen exhaustion. She doubted that she had another minute to live!

April touched the hull, pulling herself along under the water. Her outstretched fingers felt the splintered wood where the waters of the bay broke through the fire-weakened hull.

She tried to swim. She couldn't force her legs to work. She grabbed the edge of the hole with her hands, pulling desperately. Her head was roaring. Her lungs struggled to expel the exhausted air. With her last conscious effort she fought the impulse to breathe in water to quench the raging fire in her chest.

She got through the hole and kicked against the slowly sinking hull with her feet. She shot up to the surface. Her head broke through the water.

She gulped, sucking air into her oxygen-starved lungs. Then a wave broke over her head. She took a mouthful of water, choked and started to cough.

Suddenly a light flashed out of the darkness full in her face. April sank. From under the water she could see the spot of light darting across the surface, seeking her.

She came up outside its radius, unable to stay down any longer. She was close to the edge of the sampan from which the light came. She moved nearer and braced herself against the hull to get her breath.

From above April Dancer heard a harsh voice say, "You were dreaming! There's no one there!"

"I tell you, I saw a woman's head. It is one of them," another voice answered.

"That is what you claimed a few minutes ago," the first voice retorted angrily. "We wasted ten minutes and found nothing."

"If they get away–"

"How could they get away? They couldn't possibly break out of that hold. Come on. Let's get out of here before the harbor police boat arrives."

"Somehow, I don't feel right about this," the uneasy voice replied.

"So what if the police find their bodies in the sunken junk? In another twenty-four hours we will be out of here and on our way back to South America with that astronaut."

"It can't be too soon for me," the other replied. "That Chinese

pirate gives me the creeps with his graveyard voice."

"Yeah, he did sound weird talking to those women there in the dark. Once I felt like running out of there myself."

"I'm going to cut for shore, Miguel. We can't risk hanging around here any longer. We should have left the sinking boat with the others."

"I wanted to stay with the radio as long as I could," Miguel replied. "I hoped there might be another message from Site G."

Slipping around through the water to the sampan's stern, April saw the shadow of the Spaniard loom up against the stars. The little two man boat was propelled by a sweep from the stern.

When the X-man grabbed the handle of the sweep, April threw all her weight against the oar blade at the other end. The unexpected movement caught the man unaware. The oar stock caught him across the chest, knocking him overboard.

He went under and came up spitting water. April came up behind him, caught the back of his head with the heel of her hand and rammed the man's face into the side of the boat.

She dived instantly and went under the tiny boat. She came up on the opposite side. Miguel was bending over the gunwale, flashing a light on the water.

"Carlos! Carlos?" he called anxiously.

April took a deep, unsteady breath, holding to the side of the sampan. She took another breath, hungrily, savoring it as if air was the most delicious thing on earth.

Then as the man across the boat leaned over farther in an attempt to spot his companion, April heaved herself up and over the gunwale into the boat. She hoped to catch him unaware. But the boat was so small that her weight caused it to bob on the water.

Miguel whirled, snatching at a gun in his waistband. April jumped to one side. The motion caused the little boat, scarcely larger than a rowboat, to bob again. The unsteady footing made the X-man's aim bad. His shot split through the air slightly above April Dancer's head.

He tried to shoot again, but she leaped at him. Her sudden rush knocked his arm aside. The gun exploded into the bay. He swung the barrel in a vicious arc at her head.

April ducked. The killing blow just missed her head, but smashed into her shoulder. She fell to her knees.

Miguel stepped back so he could shoot again. Desperately April lunged, grappling her arms about his legs. He fell heavily.

Before he could twist his body up, April snapped the hidden catch on her finger ring. It was the last of the U.N.C.L.E. protective devices she had left. A tiny needle shot out from the hidden reservoir in the ring. She jammed it deep into Miguel's arm.

He cursed and tried to jerk back, the potion worked fast. His movements were sluggish. He got his arm half up, but could never get the gun aimed at the girl from U.N.C.L.E.

He fell to his knees and rolled over on his back. He did not lose consciousness, but stared at the sky, breathing with a shuddering rasp.

April scrambled up. In the distance she could see a light flashing on the water and hear the roar of a speed boat's engine. She correctly surmised that it was a patrol boat the Hong Kong harbor police. April Dancer stepped hastily across the prone body of the Project X man. She grabbed the oar handle and started to move the sweep. The little sampan headed swiftly toward the shore. Anxiously April watched the oncoming boat, hoping the sweeping arc of its searchlight would not pick them up.

While she could call on them for help, they were bound by certain rules of procedure. Since her own evidence would not have to be presented in court, April Dancer had to take another tack. She did not want her procedures spoiled by police red tape.

When the police patrol's searchlight picked out the half-sunken junk and veered, April breathed easier. She kept moving the sweep until the little boat was well out of range. Then she let it drift slowly toward the shore.

She got down on her knees beside Miguel. Her sensitive fingers touched his pulse. It was weaker than she would have liked. The new U.N.C.L.E. truth serum was extremely powerful. She worried that she might have given the X-man too strong a dose.

"What is your name?" April asked as a preliminary test.

"Miguel de Cervantes," the man answered in a dull voice.

"Are you a member of Project X?"

"Yes," he said.

She went on quickly, asking what country he was from and who was behind Project X.

The latter question he did not know, but when she asked about the nature of their search, he answered readily enough: "We are supposed to receive the astronaut from the Khmerranians when they capture him."

"Why does Project X need this astronaut's information?" she asked.

"To fill in the one gap missing from their own death ray."

"What is that?"

"The satellites act like auto distributor condensers," he said. "They store up the cosmic rays and then release them in powerful pulses. Our people have not succeeded in building condensers that will hold their charges long enough to be practical."

"That is all they need?" April asked.

"The rest they gathered earlier from spies in the American

laboratories, where the satellites were assembled. The spy was caught before she could learn the condenser secret which is the heart of the death ray space moons."

"What can this do?"

"It can flash a beam at the earth powerful enough to destroy any living thing in its radiation arc," Miguel said in a mechanical, sleep-walker's voice.

"Do the directors of Project X really intend to use this frightful weapon or will they bluff with it?"

"The plan calls for complete destruction of every national capital as well as other selected major cities. They believe that it is necessary to have complete political chaos so they can move into the vacuum."

"How long after the astronaut is captured could Project X be placed in orbit?" April Dancer asked.

"A matter of days," Miguel's dead voice droned.

April shivered. "A matter of days!" she repeated in husky whisper. She shuddered again and took a deep breath.

Almost fearfully she asked her next question: "How close are the Khmerranians to finding the astronaut?"

"The radio message came in from Project X's Site G in Khmerrania a short time ago that the search party had located the space capsule."

"Where is Site G?"

"On the Mekong River in Khmerrania," he said.

Under April's direct question he rattled off the coordinates–the latitude and longitude of the location.

"How far is this from where the capsule was found?" April asked.

"About twenty miles," he replied.

"Did the Khmerranians give the location of the space capsule?"

"Yes," he replied, and gave the coordinates which were almost identical with the ones for the Site G.

April felt another chill. The natives, of course, would know their jungle well. It would surely be only a short time before they captured the lost astronaut.

"Who is in charge of your Hong Kong cell?" April asked next.

In the starlight she could see the X-man's face twist. Sweat popped out on his face. He spoke, but reluctantly, fighting hard against the drug.

April knew the symptoms. The powerful drug was short lived. She had but a few seconds more. There was no chance for a second injection. The ring's tiny reservoir held only a single dose.

"Senor Juan Morales," the man from Project X said, answering her question.

"Where is his headquarters?" April asked quickly, hurrying to get in a final bit of information before it was too late.

"In-in-godown–"

"Where?" April cried as his voice faltered.

"Rice warehouse, on–"

"Where?"

"–on Quay Road–behind–" His faltering voice trailed off.

His body shuddered and stiffened. April reached over with the gun he dropped when she jumped him. She hit him across the temple. A blubbering sound came from his gaping mouth. He relaxed, unconscious.

April grabbed the sweep and started rowing for the pier. Behind, the police boat was circling the almost sunken junk. Its searchlight was sweeping in a wide arc.

There was no shoreline here on lower Aberdeen Bay. A rock rampart was constructed to protect the buildings fronting the water's edge. April pulled into a tiny quay and made the boat's rope fast to an iron ring set in the concrete.

A narrow flight of stone steps led up the dike to the narrow street. She hesitated, wondering if it would be better to get to a phone first. She needed to report to Waverly in New York. Direct communication was not possible, since she had lost her pen-communicator in her purse.

Also, she would have liked for the Hong Kong police to jail the X-man until he could be questioned more closely. April hesitated just for the briefest moment. "There isn't time!" she told herself. "Every second counts now!"

As she remembered Hong Kong, Quay Road was about an eighth of a mile down the bay. She started to run, but the near drowning had taken too much out of her. Her lungs still burned and her legs shook. She slowed to a fast walk.

She saw a taxi let out a couple headed for one of the famous bay floating restaurants. She started to hail it, but remembered she had no money. She walked on hurriedly, hugging the dark side of the street, keeping as much in the moon-cast shadows as possible.

She came to Quay Road. To her dismay there were three rice warehouses in a row. She stopped, trying to decide which it might be. She tried to recall something the X-man said that might give her a clue.

Her mind was too dulled by fatigue. April shook her head in a futile effort to clear it. She started to cross the street, but stopped hastily when she saw the shadowed figure of a man crouched low on the roof of the center warehouse. He was moving slowly down the pitch.

"That must be the one," she told herself, gripping the gun in her damp pocket tightly.

Then she saw the dark figure jump the intervening distance to the next roof. April Dancer stopped, hesitated.

"Did he come from the cell headquarters, meaning the place could be in warehouse B or is he headed for it–meaning it would be in the adjoining building?" she asked herself.

The answer was vital. With the Khmerranians moving in on the missing astronaut, the success or failure of U.N.C.L.E.'s attempt to save the world's capital cities could be lost by a few second's delay.

Suddenly making up her mind, she started for the center building. Then she stopped, shrinking back in the moon-cast shadows. There was a second man on the roof. She watched him. From his furtive movements it appeared to April that he was following the first.

Then the first crossed to the building farthest back from Quay Road. He slipped over the eaves and swung down and through a broken loft window.

His pursuer did not follow, but scurried down a fire ladder and entered a small door at the side of the building.

April hurried after him. Her heart was beating wildly. She was sure that she was wrong, but something in the silhouette of the first man when he swung off the building reminded her of Mark Slate.

She opened the door, pushing it gently. She did not enter, but pressed back against the building waiting tensely to see if the man who entered ahead of her would catch the movement.

There was no sound from inside. April entered cautiously, pressing against the inside wall. It was almost midnight back inside the warehouse. Here and there a shaft of moonlight penetrated through a broken window, but the piles of bagged rice broke the streamers, leaving pitch black alleys between the stacks.

In the back she could see a small room. A thin line of light showed under the door. Holding the gun firmly, April moved from the wall over to the first line of rice stacks. Softly she moved through the blackness.

Suddenly she stopped. At the opposite end she saw a man, hesitant and furtive. He was moving rapidly. In the brief glimpse she got April could see a gun in his hand. Then she saw the other man, the one who came across the roof.

There was a slight movement behind her. April froze, pressing back hard against the sacks. She jerked the gun up, tense, ready to fire. A rat ran up the stack. April let her breath out in a soft sigh and inched closer to the end of the stack line. There she had to cross a short break through which the moonlight streamed.

She stepped across it hastily and paused on the other side, waiting for some sign that she had been observed. For a second she saw nothing. Then a hand snaked from around a stack of rice snacks. A

gun leveled in her direction.

It was an U.N.C.L.E. special! “It is Mark!” she thought.

But she couldn’t shout a warning to him. There was the furtive man following Slate somewhere in the darkness, and there were the X-men in the room in back. She could not afford to alert either by calling out to Slate.

April dropped to her knees to make as small a target as possible. Mark Slate, however, was having difficulty spotting his target again. He held his fire. April started to inch forward, trying to get close to whisper to him.

But as she moved, April saw the shadow of the furtive man loom up behind Mark. A snatch of moonlight fell across his hand. She saw the gun leveled at Mark Slate’s dark form.

There wasn’t time to shout a warning. April had her own gun up. She squeezed the trigger. The report was deafening in. the warehouse. It echoed among the rafters, sounding like several shots.

Slate’s pursuer screamed and pitched on his face.

Slate whirled and threw a quick shot in April’s direction. In his haste there wasn’t time to use the infra-red darkness-penetrating sight. The bullet crashed into the rice behind April’s head. She ducked flat, crying, “You’re a lousy shot, Mark!”

“April!” he cried, his voice shaking with great relief! He rubbed his eyes. “Come on! We’ve got to get out of here fast! There’s more of them in the rear!”

A powerful electric torch suddenly shot out of the darkness, throwing Mark Slate in a blinding spotlight. Then a voice penetrated the night.

“Get him! Get him! Death to any fool who lets him get away!”

April Dancer shivered. It was the deadly voice of the junk captain crying out of the dark!

NINE

THE TRAP

Mark Slate yelled loudly and broke for the door! He was deliberately drawing the X-men's attention away from a different direction with the element of complete surprise on her side. But her gun had only three shots left in it!

Worse yet, it was an ordinary automatic. It did not have the marvelous U.N.C.L.E. infra-red sights that could pick out a target in total darkness simply from the heat radiation of the body.

The chance was excellent that Mark, in exposing himself to save April Dancer, had dug his own grave.

Two men ran past April, but still she held her fire. There were three more on the opposite side. There were not enough bullets left to down them all.

In that split second when Slate's life depended on her flank attack. April made a desperate decision. Mark Slate, she knew, had no way of knowing that she was inadequately armed. He surely thought that she would be able to hold up her end of the battle.

So–April ignored all five of Mark's pursuers. She whirled and raced to the end of the rice stack. The gaunt figure of the junk captain stood in the lighted doorway of the back room, shouting for his men to be careful to take Mark Slate alive.

He broke off at sight of April. He screamed and grabbed for the gun about his waist.

April shot as the captain's gun raised. The force of the bullet kicked his spare frame back against the wall. He choked and fell on his face.

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. darted toward him, stooping to snatch up the dying man's gun. One of Mark's pursuers, deciding the girl was the greater danger, whirled and shot at April.

In the excitement he moved too fast. His bullet missed April's head by inches. It smashed into the wall. April, growing calmer with the increase in danger, put a bullet into his chest.

The other two surviving X-men split and ducked into the dark corridors between the high stacks of rice bags.

April, anticipating their gunfire, ducked behind the body of the dead junk captain. She sprawled flat on the floor to present as small a target as possible.

There were a few breathless moments when both sides were afraid

to move. Then April half raised her head. She had her gun ready but did not shoot. She was trying to decoy them into giving away their position by firing at her. It was a life gamble that she could duck fast enough.

Both men bit at her bait. They shot at her. One explosion followed the other in quick succession. The muzzle blast betrayed their positions to Mark Slate. His first shot caught the nearest X-man in the side of the face. The second smashed into the other man's chest as he whirled to face the new danger.

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. made a hasty count. By her figuring there were but two left to face them. Slate came over to join her. Together they pressed against the heavy sacks of rice and waited.

There wasn't time for a greeting. They quickly moved back to back, each hawkishly watching his and her direction for the slightest movement of their enemies. For ten seconds there was a complete silence. Nothing moved in the dark warehouse.

Then April whispered softly, "Dr. Slate, I presume!"

Mark grinned in the darkness. "Fancy meeting you here!" he replied, equally softly.

Suddenly a light flashed out of the darkness toward them. Slate whirled and fired at it. Too late he realized it was a trap to draw out their position.

The X-man's bullet skimmed his cheek and smashed into the rice bags a scant inch from April's nose. They both fired together. The report of their guns blended into a single explosion.

There was no answering shot from the X-man, but the flashlight still lay on the floor where he had tossed it earlier. The beam still pointed toward them.

The two agents from U.N.C.L.E. retreated slowly to get out of the light.

"We must have hit him," Slate said softly.

"But there's another one somewhere."

"*That,*" Mark Slate said with a hard note coming into his casual voice, "is his misfortune!"

"Well–" April began and then called frantically, "Look out, Mark!"

Slate jerked around to see what had alarmed her. Too late he saw the pile of rice bags tumbling over on top of him. He jumped back. But a one-hundred pound sack hit his shoulder. The falling weight knocked him down. Before he could recover other bags kept tumbling off the stack. From the opposite end of the warehouse the darkness was ripped by muzzle blast as the second X-man cut down on them with his gun.

Mark Slate was partially protected by the heavy jute bags of rice which pinned him down. April was fully exposed to the fire from both

the shooter and the X-man who had toppled the bags over on Slate.

April ducked, firing as she went. The shot went wild, but it caused the X-man to duck back out of sight. The one on top of the stack leaned over, trying to find a target.

April whirled. Her bullet caught the unbalanced man in the shoulder, but it was only a skin breaker. He jerked back, but lost his balance. He came hurtling down on top of the bags pinning Mark Slate.

April rose up over the fallen sacks. She caught the slight movement of the other man in the dark. She fired at the shadow and heard a scream as the shadow fell.

Her distraction to make that shot gave the man who fell from atop the stacks the chance he was looking for. He scrambled around, aiming his gun full at April's chest.

Slate was pinned down so tightly he could not get out. The bags lay across his back and legs. He was face down, but his arms were free. He had twisted as much as he could, pushing futilely against the hundred pound sacks crushing him.

He saw the danger facing April. He heaved with all his strength, but the weight on top of him was too much. He lashed out with his hand, trying to grab the killer's ankle, but missed by inches.

In an anguish of fear for his companion Slate saw the X-man raise his gun.

Unable to move to help her, Slate did the only thing he could. He yelled, a wild, piercing bansheeish scream that caused the killer to flinch. The X-man's grated nerves made his aim unsteady. The bullet intended for April Dancer's chest whined over her shoulder.

Before he could shoot again, April hurled her now empty gun into his face. He staggered back. She caught his arm, intending a judo throw, but his sleeve ripped and she lost her grasp.

He fell from the backward momentum of his attempt to get away from her. This brought him too close to the imprisoned man from U.N.C.L.E.

Mark Slate's frantic fingers caught his ankle. The X-man sprawled fiat again. He twisted, trying to put a bullet in Mark.

April jerked her body around and the spike heel of her shoe rammed into the killer's side. He doubled up in pain. April snatched up his gun and shoved it in Mark's hand. He covered the groaning Xman while April pulled the heavy bags off Slate's body.

"Can you move?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes," Slate said. "The weight just had me pinned where I couldn't get enough leverage to push my way out."

"Okay!" April said crisply. "We haven't a second to lose. The Khmerranian searchers have found the astronaut's capsule!"

“Then you know what the whole thing is about?” Slate asked.

“I know something,” April said hurriedly. “Maybe not all, but you can fill me in later. We’ve got to get into Khmerrania and fast.”

“Mr. Waverly already has it set up for us,” Slate said, stretching gingerly as bruised muscles protested his movement. “Permission has been obtained from Cambodia for Professor Marcus Slaterson and his wife, Aprelda, to go to Angkor for scientific studies of the ruins. The air route, I suppose you know, lies across the southern end of Khmerrania.”

“Great!” April said.

“How are you at sky diving?”

“I can do it if you can!”

“So the only thing holding us up is a destination. We have the way to get into Khmerrania, but we don’t know where to go when we get there.”

“I think I have the answer to that!” April said, her excitement growing.

Quickly she sketched for him what had happened to her. He prudently kept quiet, for the present, about his own experience with Avis Avalee. He did not want to admit to April that the girl from THRUSH had outwitted him.

“And,” April concluded hurriedly, “the Project X men were using this warehouse and the junk as their headquarters here in Hong Kong. They got word from their Khmerranian field division known as Site G that the Khmerranians had found the space capsule and expect to get the astronaut any minute.”

But did you hear where they think the astronaut is?” Slate asked. “If not, it is no help to us. We haven’t time to go into Khmerrania and start looking. We must cut right to the heart of the knot.”

“The capsule is close to Site G,” the girl from U.N.C.L.E. said. “So he–”

She motioned toward their groaning prisoner.

“–So he should know where Site G is. I used all my truth serum. Do you have any?”

Mark Slate nodded. The X-man looked up at them. He tensed.

“Go on!” April Dancer ordered, holding the gun level with his eyes. “Go on, jump him if you dare!”

He shuddered and flinched as Mark Slate flicked out the tiny needle hidden in the black star sapphire ring he wore. Mark jabbed it into the X-man’s arm.

As the serum took hold, they questioned him closely. The last report from Site G, they learned, was that the astronaut had been located, but had escaped their net. Capture was expected momentarily.

“The site? Where is it?” April asked.

Mark Slate pulled out his pen-communicator as their prisoner talked. He gave Alexander Waverly a quick report, adding, “April and I will follow the original plan and go into Khmerrania by accident. We will leave at once.”

“Excellent,” Mr. Waverly said. “Is Miss Dancer in sufficient physical condition after her ordeal to go with you? This will undoubtedly be a most strenuous endeavor.”

“I am in top physical condition,” April told Mr. Waverly.

Mark Slate’s appreciative eye noted the way her wet dress was molded to her body. “Yes,” he said. “That is apparent.”

“Very well, Mr. Slate, I will send word for the plane to be readied for you. Can you start within an hour?”

“Yes, sir,” Slate said, looking at April, who nodded.

“Then good luck,” Alexander Waverly said. “I understand fully what difficulties you face in this terrible matter. You are going into an unknown jungle, much of which has never been explored. In addition to the natural dangers, which are formidable in themselves, you must fight THRUSH, the Khmerranians, and the men from Project X.”

“We’ll get by,” April said quietly.

“I am sure you will,” Alexander Waverly replied. “And I will have help to you just as quickly as it can get there. Mr. Kuryakin will be leaving in a matter of minutes. Mr. Solo will follow from South America. However, do not wait on them. Every second counts.”

Much as they hated to lose the time, it was necessary for Slate and April Dancer to return to the hotel. Slate had to lay aside his loud Carnaby Street wardrobe for the outdated garb of a not overly well endowed professional type. April Dancer scrubbed off her lipstick and powder, pulled her hair up in an unbecoming knot, and put on flat heels to complement her shapeless tweed skirt.

The change was made as quickly as possible. Then, with the support of the Hong Kong police, they were whisked to the airport where a representative of the U.S. Embassy had new passports made out in their cover-up identities. The proper Cambodian visas were in order.

As they went out to the plane, Slate explained that it was a charter job.

“A small two-engine prop job,” “The wheel retracts and floats can come down. This will be nice, for I have consulted my horoscope, crystal ball, and favorite gypsy tea leaves reader and all assure me that we just might be forced to make an emergency landing on the Mekong River, where it swings through Khmerrania.”

“How far is this emergency landing spot from Project X’s Site G?” April asked.

“It is just slightly up river from the site–if the location we got that reluctant X-man is correct. The border mountains are upstream. I figure he would head for them and try to get out of Khmerrania and into Vietnam, where he can contact Americans.”

“Well,” April said, “if we don’t stop talking and start walking, time is going to run out on us.”

Slate’s face sobered. “I know you what mean,” he said.

“The pilot?” April Dancer “Anybody we know?”

Mark Slate shook his head. “This matter of national borders is so important that there must be no suggestion that the United States is violating any country’s neutrality. We are scientific investigators for a museum. When the plane is forced down the pilot must be able to pass any suspicions of the Khmerranian government.”

“If he isn’t in on the matter, how do we make an emergency landing?” April asked.

“There is a tiny device in the plane’s engine,” Mark Slate explained. “It is activated by a radio signal from our pen-communicators. So don’t call Waverly for anything until after I cut off the engines.”

“I don’t know if mine will work,” April said. “I just grabbed my spare purse at the hotel. All my other devices were lost when I was taken to the junk.”

“Do you have everything else?”

“Everything,” April said. “The smoke bomb mints, the explosive chewing gum, a new truth serum ring, the cigarette lighter tape recorder, the pen communicator, and the rest.”

“Then we’re in splendid shape for the shape we’re in,” Slate said.

April nodded and closed her eyes. In a couple of seconds she was sleeping. Slate shook his head wonderingly. April’s marvelous power of recuperating never ceased to amaze him.

He closed his own eyes, but could not sleep. He kept seeing a vision of the Potomac River flowing past a Washington that had become a mausoleum, a Seine River that was the only moving thing in Paris, and a London that had become a graveyard.

The hours passed swiftly. Suddenly his wrist watch gave a tiny bleep. Slate sat up tensely. The signal came from the standard world navigation satellite used by ships for pinpointing their positions. The tiny signal told Slate that they were nearing their location in Khmerrania. He had earlier set up the disguised navigation device in the watch for the coordinates on the map.

He nudged April awake.

“This is it,” he said. “I have received the first signal. When the bleeps turn into a steady hum, I will jam the engine.”

April took out her pen-communicator from her purse. She extended

the six-inch antenna and adjusted the wave length by turning the cap.

"What is the good word?" she asked.

His lips formed the word "Uncle." April nodded that she understood.

"Please fasten your seat belts," the pilot's voice came over the intercom back to the tiny cabin. "We are running into bad weather ahead," he said. "A typhoon is forecast, but we will land at Siem Reap outside of Angkor at least two hours before then. However, the air may be a little rough."

Two minutes later the tiny bleep-bleep of the navigation device settled into a steady hum.

"This is it!" Slate said to April. Then into the pen-communicator she held for him, he said, "Uncle!"

April looked out the window of the plane. The tropical jungle stretched all the way to the mountains in an unbroken sea of green. The mountains were almost obscured by the approaching storm. The great Mekong River, winding down from Laos, snaked its way through the jungle.

The thin silver thread seemed too small from the air to afford them a landing spot.

While she watched, the engines cut out. The pilot called back: "We have trouble. We'll have to make an emergency landing. Don't worry. Everything will be all right. We have pontoons. We'll make a landing on the river."

"Well, here we go!" April said. Her dark eyes were shining.

They spiraled down rapidly. The green sea started to take on individual form.

"I think I see what looks like a jungle outpost," the pilot reported over the intercom. "I'll try to put her down beside it."

"Is that good for us?" April asked.

"It may be," Slate said. "Our papers are in order. I don't suspect they will penetrate our disguise. They will have to bring the astronaut back here to Site G to turn him over to the men from Project X. We will be in a good spot."

"Or at least in a spot!" April said, but the look of pleasure on her face belied her words.

"I am going over the river outpost," the pilot called. "It will alert the operators so they can follow us if we land too far away from there."

They came in at about two-hundred feet.

April watched carefully, seeking some idea of how many X-men manned the outpost.

"I think it is deserted," she said, frowning. "I don't–"

Her words were cut off by a sudden lurch of the plane.

“They’re shooting at us!” the pilot’s voice cried from the cockpit. “I–”

The little plane yawed and then started to sideslip. Fire burst from the left wing tank. They were losing altitude in an alarming manner. Already they were too low to bail out.

The tops of the giant jungle trees reached up to catch their fall.

April Dancer and Mark Slate braced themselves as best they could for the coming crash!

TEN

MOUNTAIN Of DOOM

As the plane came down, the pilot jerked back on the stick with all his strength in a desperate attempt to bring up the diving nose. The screaming wind caught the elevators. The nose came up a little, but the plane had lost flying speed.

The tail dragged across the tree tops. Shudders went through the falling plane. It was not a hard fall. The dragging tail slowed their speed and the tightly entwined tree limbs acted as a great spring to cushion the shock.

The plane never touched the ground, but rocked to a stop, still supported by the shattered trunks and limbs of the tropical forest giants.

One wing was almost completely engulfed with flames. Mark Slate jerked off his seat belt and ran to the pilot's compartment. He saw with regret that the man had not come out of the crash as well as his passengers. The broken stub of a limb had crashed through the windshield and was driven through his body.

Slate ran back to April Dancer. Already the girl from U.N.C.L.E. had the door open. It was a ten-foot drop to the ground. April grabbed the edge of the door and let herself down on her extended arms.

Then she dropped lightly the rest of the way. Slate grabbed two emergency survival kits from the parachutes stacked in a cabinet back of the pilot's compartment. He threw them down to April and then dropped out himself.

They started to run, knowing that the burning wing would reach the gasoline tank momentarily.

For a short time they made good progress through the area torn loose by the falling plane, but once past this they ran into almost solid jungle. Parasitic plants grew so thickly they could make no progress at all.

Slate jerked a machete from the jungle survival kit and started hacking madly at the tangled vines. Behind them the flames reached the main gas tank of the plane. It exploded in a crash of flame that shot high in the air.

The two from U.N.C.L.E. burrowed deeply into the thick vegetation to escape the rain of fire that fell out from the explosion.

April Dancer raised up.

"Are you okay, Mark?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes," Slate said. "But we have to get out of here fast. That

explosion will give our position away for sure. The way they shot our plane down shows that Site G will not accept any strangers. Our plan was shot down with the plane, April."

"Okay," she said. "We'll make a new one. There isn't a chance for us to hack out a trail fast enough to stay ahead of them. So let's take to the trees!"

She started to climb up the tangled vines strangling a giant tree with a silvery gray bark. Close to the top she balanced on a huge branch long enough to test a vine as large around as her wrist when she found it would hold her weight, April swung across to a neighboring banyan tree. She landed on a huge limb which snaked a hundred roots down to the ground in the curious manner of these spreading wonders.

Mark Slate followed her, but his heavier weight was too much for the vine. It tore loose from above. He started to fall. Frantically he twisted in the air with a dexterity born of his years with the British Olympic ski team.

He grabbed a branch and laboriously pulled himself up beside April Dancer.

"You Jane, okay," he panted, and attempted a smile. "But me Tarzan is out!"

"Well, what's next, Mark?" April said.

"The best I can recommend is that you stay–" He broke off, listening intently. "Can you hear it?" he said.

"Yes," she said. "They are coming. It sounds like machetes slashing the undergrowth."

"The way I have it figured," Slate said. "We must have crashed about two miles from the Site G. They could not have cut their way through the jungle that far. There must be some sort of a trail near here."

"'We're not far from the river," April Dancer said. "I saw it as we went down."

"If they came by the river, then they probably left a boat on the bank," Mark Slate said. "How would you like to do a little pirating?"

"Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum!"

They started to climb cautiously through the trees, working their way slowly back toward the wreck. They worked their way into the top of a huge fromager tree where they could see the wreck. They could see two men who looked Spanish and two Khmerranians. The fire was still too hot for them to approach the wreck.

"We're okay," Slate whispered to April. "They'll think we're in there until the thing gets cool enough for them to probe. Come on!"

The next tree was too far for them to swing over. They laboriously climbed down. They began to work their way along through the thick

underbrush, depending on the roar of the flaming airplane to hide the noise they made.

They were making fair progress when a third Khmerranian came running up the path from the river.

"*Senor* Morales!" he cried in passable Spanish. "They have found the lost astronaut!"

A tall, gaunt man wearing a floppy sun helmet whirled, "Where?" he called sharply.

"The message just came from the searchers! They have him trapped on the Mount of the Castle!"

"But, have they taken him?" Morales inquired,

"They have him trapped. He cannot get away."

"How long before they expect to capture him?" Morales asked.

"The rain, it is come to the mountains," the Khmerranian said. "It is hard to say."

"What about that helicopter we saw just before this plane came?" Morales asked.

"It vanished, senor!"

"Things like that don't vanish!" Morales snapped. "Get some men and find out what become of it. That woman from THRUSH is in it, if we can depend on the information we received by radio from Hong Kong. We must move fast!"

He turned and started up the freshly hacked trail in a clumsy run. The others followed him.

"There goes our chance," Slate said bitterly. "If that idiot had waited a few minutes more, we would have had our yacht!"

"If a frog had wings, he would bump himself as he jumps," April said. "You had better report to Mr. Waverly that we're not doing so good."

"I suppose so," Slate said glumly .

He pulled out the pen-communicator and extended the antenna. After the connection was made, he reported that they had been shot down.

"I don't know what you can do, Mr. Slate," Alexander Waverly said, "They will have this man before we can get help to you. We are handicapped by international diplomacy. The United States representative to the United Nations requested that organization's help in putting pressure on the Khmerranian government to permit a search party to come in to look for the astronaut."

"And the Khmerranians refused, sir?" Slate said.

"Yes," Waverly said. "And the U.S. has never admitted the real danger. It cannot afford to. Everything depends upon you."

"The only clue we have is that he is trapped in a place called the Mount of the Castle."

“Call me back in fifteen minutes,” Waverly said. “If that is a mapped landmark in Khmerrania, I’ll have details from the geographical computer.”

Waverly broke off the connection. April and Slate followed the fresh path down to the river. They found the marks where the boat had been drawn up on the shore, but there was no sight of the men. At this point the river made a sharp bend.

They could see up and down it but a short distance.

By this time fifteen minutes had passed. Slate called U.N.C.L.E. headquarters again.

“Yes,” Waverly said quickly. “The Mount of the Castle is a famous landmark far off the beaten track. It is so difficult to get to that the last time it was visited was ten years ago, when an archeological group went there. It is the ruins of an ancient Khmer stronghold in a very inaccessible location on a rugged mountain about a mile from where the Mekong River cuts through a sheer gorge.”

“Do you have our location, sir?” Slate asked.

“Yes, our directional devices pinpointed your transmission. You are about twenty miles below the location. You should be able to see it from your position.”

“There is a severe storm coming in,” Mark Slate replied. “There are nothing but clouds to the north of us.”

“Well, it is there!” Alexander Waverly said. ”Take the National Geographic Society’s word for it! Just get up there and get this man!”

“Yes, sir!” Mark Slate said. “Anything else, sir?”

“Just do that and it will be sufficient–sufficient to save the major cities of the world from total destruction!”

“Yes, sir,” Slate said. “We will take care of the matter.”

“Mr. Slate, I am positive that you will!” Waverly said.

There was complete conviction in his voice. After Slate broke the connection, he said to April Dancer, “I hope he’s right.”

“There is something else,” April said. “This astronaut is running for his life. He will not know we’re friends. He probably thinks everyone who approaches him is an enemy.”

“We’ll try to change his mind!” Slate said positively. “He’s getting help, like it or not.”

“Okay, what do we do?”

“First we’ll get down the river to Site G headquarters and see what we can do about stealing a boat. They must have more than one. Then we’ll divide up the enemy between us and go for broke.”

It was late in the evening when they finally fought their way up the river to Site G. Heavy crocodile infestation kept them from swimming and the lush thick jungle grew right down to the water’s

edge which required them to cut a way for themselves.

Surveying the site from screening trees, they saw that site G looked much like any jungle teak logging camp set up by a river to handle hardwood shipments cut in the mountains.

There was a clearing and a small cluster of houses backed by an elephant compound. A boathouse and a pier jutted out into the river. There were two motor boats tied to the pier, but neither was the one used by the X-men who came to the plane.

"That means they have gone north to join the Khmerranians who have the astronaut trapped," April said.

Slate nodded soberly. "Even if we are successful in stealing a boat, I'm afraid they have a good head start on us."

"There are still quite a number of people at the station," April said, peering intently through the leaves.

"Yes, it looks like a real teak camp," Slate said. "Too many for us. We'll have to wait for darkness."

"That'll be an hour," she said. "And the storm is rolling in fast. We can't wait, Mark."

"I know," he said and grinned at her. "I was just hoping. Come on. I never wanted to grow old anyway!"

They worked their way as closely as they could. Then Mark Slate took a thin vine, as narrow as a piece of string. He jammed his gun into the fork of a tree and fastened the vine to the trigger. Then he and April worked their way down along the edge of the clearing, tying more lengths of vine to the original piece.

"I think that is as much as we can trust," Slate said at last. "If we make it too long, it will break. Are you ready?"

April nodded. Slate pulled his improvised cord. The gun exploded, ripping a shell through the slatted walls of the elephant compound. The great beasts trumpeted in sudden fear. The two agents from U.N.C.L.E. could hear the shouts of the *mahouts*, running to quiet their charges.

"Come on!" Slate said hurriedly. Under cover of the excitement, he and April made a dash for the boat dock. They reached the boat easily. Slate kicked over the engine.

"They've seen us, Mark!"

"Hang on tight!" he rasped. "The boat is chained to the dock. I'm jerking it loose!"

He gunned the engine. The boat shot forward. April braced herself as best she could, but the terrific jar knocked her back in the cockpit. For a second she was half stunned and did not realize what was happening.

The chain did not break. It ripped away a section of the dock way. The jerk and the heavy drag caused Slate to lose control of the boat. It

spun around and rammed its bow into the soft mud bank just below the pier.

A bullet ripped into the boat. Slate gave up trying to free the stuck boat. He whirled and shot back. Another bullet smashed into the hull from a different direction. The loggers were coming in on them from two sides.

April Dancer raised up, still groggy, but her mind was sufficiently clear to understand their extreme danger. She fumbled in her purse, pulling out the little package of smoke bomb mints. Tiny marvels from the U.N.C.L.E. chemical laboratory, they turned into bombs when dropped in water.

She broke the package and hurled its entire contents in a sweeping circle. Smoke shot up from the water, billowing in a blinding cloud that swept down upon them. It was stifling, but protecting.

"I've got to get in the water and push us off!" Slate gasped. "Hold your breath, April. I think we can make it before we suffocate in the smoke!"

"Mark! Be careful!" April cried. "There's crocodiles in the water!"

"I can't help it!" he gasped. "Being eaten is no worse than falling into the hands of those Khmerranian devils!"

"Just a minute" April cried. "Let me beat on the water. Maybe that will scare them away!"

She started hammering on the surface with a piece of the broken dock. Slate jumped out, waist deep in the churning water. An ugly snoot rammed out of the river just beyond him. April could see it dimly through the thickening smoke. She jerked up her gun and fired as the huge mouth opened.

The ugly reptile turned over, threshing the water in agony. Slate gave it no more heed than a mosquito. He threw his entire weight against the bow of the stuck boat. The boat moved slightly.

"Now reverse the motor, April!" he shouted. "It's far enough out now that it won't tangle the propeller."

April sprang back and threw the engine in gear. The boat shuddered. Slate heaved against the bow again. It started to move. He pulled himself aboard.

The smoke was thickening so much both were coughing badly. Suddenly a bullet crashed through the smoke and buried itself into the gunwale.

"Can they see through the smoke?" April gasped.

"They're shooting blindly. Get down, April! We're going to make a run for it!"

He opened the throttle full. The little boat shot forward. It zoomed out of the spreading smoke screen. Three guns cut down on them the minute they appeared. It was useless to try to shoot back. The boat

was so rough in the choppy water that it was impossible to aim. Their only salvation lay in all the speed they could get out of the little boat.

It did not take long to get beyond range of the rifles, but four of the Khmerranians grabbed the other boat and set out in pursuit. It was larger than the small craft April and Slate were able to steal. It started gaining immediately. April fished a package of the chewing gum explosive from her bag of U.N.C.L.E. protective devices. A couple of water spouts from the powerful demolition material forced their pursuers back momentarily. But as the night fell, April could see that they had not given up the pursuit.

Total darkness came quickly and with it the heavy rain that preceded the oncoming typhoon. The river became a torrent. The boat made headway with difficulty. Slate turned on the searchlight in the bow, but it was scant help. They huddled wet and miserable, stung by slashing rain and buffeted by the rising fury of the wind.

A gigantic splash of lightning ripped across the sky, momentarily opening their vision with a weird blue light. What they saw in that flash was scarcely comforting. The Mekong was narrowing as they approached a great gorge slashed through towering granite cliffs. The river was approaching the speed of a rapids. The boat motor, opened to its full power, was barely making headway against the surging water.

“We’re not going to be able to go much farther!” Slate shouted to April. “We–”

He broke off as the searchlight picked up foaming water churning about giant boulders in the river. He threw over the rudder hard in a desperate effort to avoid a disastrous crash. The boat turned quickly, aided by the rushing fury of the river, but not quickly enough. The heavy rain had so weakened the light beam that Mark Slate had not seen the danger until it was too late.

The boat swung around, but a violent whirlpool caused by the huge rocks caught the stern. The shock knocked April half out of the cockpit. Slate was fighting the wheel. April pulled herself up and crawled slowly aft to inspect the damage.

The planks were badly shattered. They were shipping water fast.

She turned and shouted to Slate: “We’re sinking!”

The wind caught her words and beat them down to a whisper he could not catch.

She started to crawl back toward him.

The boat lurched. The stern went under a foaming charge of water.

It splashed completely over April and hit Slate with a savage intensity that knocked him half out of the boat.

ELEVEN

CLIFF HANGER

The boat shuddered but the empty gas tank up front helped keep the bow in the air when the stern went down.

Coughing from swallowed water, April caught the small guard rail, pulled herself laboriously from the lashing foam. Mark Slate braced himself and extended a helping hand to her. April was having difficulty. She could only hang on with one hand. The other tightly clasped her waterproof purse. It was precious to her, holding as it did her remaining U.N.C.L.E. protective devices. Without them she and Slate would have only their bare hands against the jungle and the modern weapons of THRUSH and Project X.

"Hang on!" Slate shouted in her ear. "The currents are sweeping us toward the bank! We may make it yet!"

But he spoke too soon. Suddenly a light loomed out of the darkness, ghostly and waveringly indistinct in the deluge falling from the sky.

"It's our pursuers!" April Dancer gasped.

"Look out! Brace yourself!" Slate cried. "We're going to crash!"

The Khmerranians saw the danger at the last second. The wheelman tried to avoid the collision. The enemy boat half turned, but the furious river slammed the wreck into the port side of the Khmerranian craft. The wreck bounced back, bobbing so that both Slate and April were swept with water.

The wreckage swerved, rebounded off a huge rock and was thrown toward the river bank.

"This is as close as we're going to get!" Mark Slate shouted above the roar of the rushing water. "We've got to swim for it!"

Still grasping her purse, April plunged into the wild foam. She lost sight of Slate as she went bobbing like a cork downstream, fighting her way slowly to the rocky bank of the river.

It was pitch black. She could see nothing. She started to stumble her way upstream, seeking Mark Slate. The raindrops blended into a solid mass of water that poured from the wind chopped clouds.

Then her foot hit something. She stumbled and fell across it. A numbing jolt of fear shook her. It was a human body! She ran her hand over the face, but it had been so badly battered that she could not tell if it was Mark Slate.

Fearfully she dug in her purse, extracting a cigarette lighter. She

turned it upside down and struck a flame from the bottom. Out of the wick burst a blue flame hot enough to cut steel. She shielded it from the rain with her body and inspected the corpse.

"*April*!"

It was Mark Slate's voice in her ear. "Put out that light! The Khmerranians are going to see it!"

"Mark!" she cried, stumbling to her feet. "The dead man! It is the Spanish member of Project X we saw inspecting our wreck. The way his face is torn it looks to me just like he had been hit by a THRUSH gun!"

"It figures!" Slate shouted back. "THRUSH is out to get the astronaut before the Khmerranians can deliver him to Project X. I wonder if this was done by Avis Avalee."

"I hope that sneak is with the THRUSH group!" April said darkly. "I have a score to settle with her!"

"Come on or we're going to get settled ourselves," Slate said.

Together they fought their way up the edge of the river. Vivid flashes of lightning revealed a stone stairs leading up toward the ruined Khmer fortification that gave the mountain its name.

"They must have gone this way for there seems nothing but sheer cliff in front," Slate said. "Up we go, April!"

They climbed as fast as the wind and rain would permit. The way was alternately lighted by brilliant lightning and blinded by pitch darkness. At the top they were partially protected from the wind by the walls of the ancient temple ruins. The temple itself was deserted except for a second corpse. This time it was a Khmerranian. Again there was evidence that the murder was done by a THRUSH gun.

Beyond the temple, and snaking up the mountain were three different trails. After hesitating, they took the center one. For a quarter of an hour they fought their way upward and then found the rugged path blocked by the debris of ages. Laboriously, exhausted, they retraced their steps.

Time was running out. Every second became more than precious now. The showdown had to come here in these granite cliffs rising above the storm-swept jungle. If their quarry escaped, it would be impossible to catch up with them again.

They held a quick conference and decided to split. April took the left trail and Slate went right.

Shortly the trail narrowed to a thin ledge curving around the sheer face of the towering cliff. At first it was relatively easy. The wind was blocked until April made a sharp curve. Then the full force of the storm hit her, slamming the hard-driven rain into the girl's face. April clawed at the cliff to keep from being swept off the canyon wall into the fiercely raging river below.

There were at least a hundred yards she had to cross before there was any further shelter from the wild wind.

But it was impossible to cross that typhoon swept area right then. April clung to the cracks in the rock and waited. The wind was gusty and she hoped for a momentary lull that would permit her to scurry across the open area.

But before that came she saw Mark Slate coming up behind her. A brilliant flash of lightning outlined him clearly–and even more vividly showed the sharp rocks reaching hungrily out of the furious water at least a hundred feet below.

Her companion came up close and shouted in her ear: "THRUSH is coming down the other trail. They took the wrong turn too. That means the astronaut is up this one. THRUSH is coming this way. We are bound to be caught between the two of them!"

April Dancer smiled grimly, "That is their misfortune!"

He grinned in spite of the gravity of their situation. "Okay," he said. " 'Lead on, MacDuff!' "

"There's a cleft ahead," she shouted back. "The wind is sweeping across the ledge with full fury. We've got to wait for a lull."

More lightning ripped the sky. The crash of the thunder was so great even the rocks seemed to shiver.

In the weird light April saw the Khmerranians across the open space. There seemed to be six of them. Looking more intently, she was thrilled to identify a bound man with them, wearing a silvered pressure suit without a helmet.

The group with their prisoner had stopped at the other side of the wind swept area for the same reason that halted April and Slate.

"Look out, Mark!" April Dancer shouted. "They've seen us!"

She watched the leader jerk up his gun. She could not hear the report in the crash of the storm, but she knew he was shooting at them.

There was another vivid burst of lightning. Mark Slate suddenly fired at a rain-sogged figure coming from behind them.

April had only a momentary glimpse, but she recognized Avis Avalee. With the girl from THRUSH were three men April did not recognize.

April jerked her own gun up. Slate caught her hand.

"Don't waste bullets," he said. "We're in one tough spot. When we run out of ammunition, we're in trouble."

"I know," April said. "I also know if we don't get them, they'll get us."

She started to fumble in her purse. Another flash of lightning cast its weird brief flare over them.

"They've seen us, Mark!" April cried.

“Yes, and so have the Khmerranians at the other end!” Mark said grimly. “Hang on, April! We’re in for a tough fight!”

The girl from U.N.C.L.E. pulled a small object that looked like a package of chewing gum from her purse. Mark Slate caught a glimpse of it during a brief flash of lightning.

He opened his mouth to warn her against using the deadly U.N.C.L.E. protective device, but changed his mind. He realized that April had surely considered that it could easily leave them trapped on the ledge. If she had made the decision anyway, then it meant that her sharp mind saw a way out for them that was not apparent to him.

April Dancer took the stick of “gum” and stripped off the wrapper. She wadded the plastic-like material in her fingers after dropping the wrapper. Then she hurled the tiny ball down the trail toward the oncoming THRUSH group.

The whipping wind caught it and whirled it out and down the chasm. A second later there was a tremendous explosion as the super-powerful U.N.C.L.E. explosive went off with a terrific roar that momentarily blotted out even the noise of the storm.

The suddenly fearful THRUSH group halted. In the next flash of lightning April saw the rain drenched figure of the girl who had tried to murder her conferring with her male companions.

For a moment April decided what she should do next. Then making a desperate decision, she wadded another stick of the gum-explosive.

Instead of throwing it, she suddenly started to run toward the THRUSH group. As long as it was dark, she did well, but another blast of lightning in the sky betrayed her. It was a tremendous burst that lingered.

Avis saw her coming. The girl from THRUSH pressed back against the cliff to steady herself from the splashing wind that threatened her aim. She held the THRUSH gun with both hands and squeezed the trigger.

April Dancer threw herself back. She hit against the cliff as the bullet smashed into the rock beside her head. She dropped to her hands and knees as total blackness returned. Then she started crawling forward.

Mark Slate shouted to her, but the storm drove his words back down his throat. He could not follow. There was a momentary lull in the fierce wind. The Khmerranians, leaving the astronaut prisoner in charge of one of their group, were rushing him from the opposite direction.

Slate caught just a glimpse of them coming during the last lightning flash. Now he crouched, his U.N.C.L.E. special aimed down at the rain-swept trail. He waited for the next illuminating bolt.

When it came, April raised up. She had pushed the plastic

explosive on to a piece of rock to make throwing it easier. Just as April started to throw the explosive she saw Avis Avalee leveling her THRUSH gun. It was April's last chance. If she missed this throw, nothing could save them.

She hurled the explosive just as the darkness closed in again. Avis' bullet, fired too hastily, went wild. For a terrible second there was nothing but the beat of the rain and the crash of thunder from the last lightning bolt.

Then it came! A tremendous burst of flame that ripped the rain apart. The trail ledge shivered and started to crumble.

April staggered back as the entire face of the cliff collapsed in the explosion area. The roar of the avalanche was louder than the fury of the storm.

The next bolt of lightning disclosed a huge scar in the cliff face and a cascade of stone rushing down into the river gorge. Where Avis and her THRUSH group had been, the trail was now gone.

April whirled. The Khmerranians had halted in startled fear when the avalanche came. She saw one of the men stagger and plunge off the cliff as Slate's bullet caught him.

April Dancer steadied herself and fired, knocking off another. The third tried to run, but his feet slipped on the wet ledge.

The fourth Khmerranian was so intent on trying to kill Mark Slate that he did not watch his prisoner close enough. As the native raised his gun to shoot, the astronaut lurched. He caught the Khmerranian with his shoulder. The native staggered, waving his hands wildly in an attempt to steady himself–and then plunged over the cliff into the darkness below.

At the next partial lull between the wind gusts, Mark State ran quickly to the astronaut's aid. April crept around to the broken end of the trail. It was shattered so badly there was no possibility of getting across it. Immediately they both showed the relieved astronaut their U.N.C.L.E. credentials.

"We'll talk later but let us know if there's a possibility of going the other way now," Slate asked.

"Impossible," the astronaut answered. "That's why my captors were bringing me back this way. The trail ahead is blocked."

"Then we're trapped!" Slate said.

"No!" April replied. "We still have some explosive gum left. I looked at the scar left by the avalanche. A couple of more explosions properly placed and there will be enough rubble so we can climb down to the river. Then it's just a case of eluding the entire Khmerranian nation to get back to Vietnam and safety."

"We can go down the river, running at night," the astronaut said. "I know where the Khmerranians left their boat. And the THRUSH

people's boat should be close to it."

"Then we've won," Mark Slate said. "I'll report to Mr. Waverly."

He took out the pen communicator. The connection was bad because of the storm's electrical interference, but he managed to make himself understood.

"Excellent," Waverly replied.

"Why don't you two stop off at any spot you desire on the way back for a well earned vacation? Have yourself some fun."

"Fun?" April Dancer said.

"What's fun about lounging around on stuffy beaches and smoky cocktail parties? Find us another job so we can have some real fun!"

"Speak for yourself!" Slate said hastily. "There's a blonde in Honolulu that I'd like–"

"An empty headed nitwit!" the girl from U.N.C.L.E. said. "And besides, that blonde hair that so intrigued you came out of a bottle. Take my word for it. Please, Mr. Waverly, isn't there something for us?"

Waverly chuckled. "We can't have you getting bored, April," he said. "Or–have a blonde-out-of-a-bottle stealing our Mr. Slate. Yes, if you want it, we have another job–and a very, very difficult one."

"We'll take it!" April Dancer cried happily while Mark Slate groaned.